

Gifted Rural Writers Explore Place in Narrative Fiction Stories

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Place-based writing practices can enrich a standardized curriculum while increasing student engagement and helping students improve essential writing skills. In particular, *place*, which includes both the geographic surroundings and the local community with whom one shares a common space, can be a point of access to the language arts curriculum for gifted rural students, especially because place-based literacy practices can demonstrate that students' place-based knowledge and interests are valuable assets they bring to their learning experiences. This article examines narrative fiction stories written by 237 gifted rural fourth graders as the culminating project of a semester-length fiction unit of a place-based language arts enrichment curriculum to identify how gifted rural fourth graders describe setting in narrative fiction stories and how they reflect a sense of place in those descriptions. Students' descriptions of settings were explicated to note how they represented spaces both similar to and different from the rural communities in which they lived. Thematic findings reveal rich descriptions of nature, depictions of close-knit rural communities, and feelings of displacement among story characters who find themselves in unfamiliar spaces.

Keywords: narrative fiction writing, setting, gifted, rural education, place-based instruction

Learning to write well prepares students to take advantage of innumerable future academic and professional opportunities (Fox, 1988). Writing is also a unique form of self-expression (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978) that has cultural value. However, with the pressure for schools to perform well on tests of measurable literacy skills, many elementary teachers limit instruction to writing conventions rather than meaningful writing (Coker et al., 2016; Graham et al., 2012; Korth et al., 2016; McCarthy & Ro, 2011; Simmerman et al., 2012). This can be especially problematic in rural schools where test scores have lagged, prompting mandates for decontextualized and commercialized curricula, further limiting teachers' ability to choose instructional materials to meet the needs of their students (Eppley, 2011; MacDaniels & Brooke, 2003). While all students need and deserve the

chance to develop their creativity and writing skills throughout the school day, the limitations imposed by standardized curricula can be significantly detrimental for gifted students, who likely master grade-level standards faster than their peers and should be challenged in ways that will continue to advance their learning (Latz & Adams, 2011; Tomlinson, 2001).

Some educators have turned to place-based pedagogy to increase curricular relevance for rural students. *Place*, in this context, refers to the place where someone lives or has lived and includes both the geographic surroundings and the local community with whom one shares a common space. In describing the attachment people feel to place, Kruger (2001) wrote, "We cherish places not just by what we can get from them, but for the way we define ourselves in relation to them . . . [as]

places with stories, memories, meanings, sentiments, and personal significance” (p. 178). Place-based pedagogy, then, aims to “ground learning in local phenomena and students’ lived experiences” (Smith, 2002, p. 586). In particular, place-based writing practices have been offered as a means to enrich a standardized curriculum while increasing student engagement and helping students improve essential writing skills (Donovan, 2016). According to Bangert and Brooke (2003), all writers “need ways to connect their literacy to the world around them—to the places, people, and interests that make their world personally meaningful” (p. 23).

One challenge faced by rural teachers is that for some students, the writing curriculum feels disconnected from their lives outside of school (Azano, 2011). For example, students are often assigned to respond to writing prompts they feel have little or nothing to do with their own experiences (Esposito, 2012; Goodson & Skillen, 2010; Ruday & Azano, 2019). In contrast, researchers have shown that place-based instruction fosters rural students’ sense of relevance toward the language arts curriculum (Azano, 2011; Ruday & Azano, 2014). This is perhaps because “place is a lens through which young people begin to make sense of themselves and their surroundings” (McInerney et al., 2011, p. 5). Place is often a central part of one’s identity (Azano, 2011; Brooke, 2003a; Donovan, 2016; Jacobs, 2011; Sobel, 1996). Hence, teaching from a place-based perspective, rather than one that privileges the perspectives of the larger dominant culture, can enhance gifted rural students’ connectedness to the language arts curriculum by demonstrating that their “unique and individualized place-based interests” are valuable assets they bring to their learning experiences (Ruday & Azano, 2019, p. 19). In fact, according to Rasheed (2019), “Place has the potential to garner students’ attention in the classroom and make meaningful curricular connections to their lives outside of the classroom” (p. 74), which can thus positively influence both individual children and the community in which they live.

In response to the challenges outlined above, this article explores one way to effectively educate

gifted rural learners in the elementary grades. The primary research questions guiding this study were (a) how gifted rural fourth graders describe setting in narrative fiction stories, and (b) how they reflect a sense of place in those descriptions. This article examines narrative fiction stories written by rural fourth graders as the culminating project of a semester-length fiction unit of a place-based language arts enrichment curriculum. In particular, because place and setting are such closely related concepts, students’ descriptions of settings are explicated to note how they represented spaces both similar to and different from the rural communities in which students lived and how the student authors used their descriptions of setting to situate their characters in the various plot lines they constructed. This area of inquiry aligns with the work of Case (2017), who wrote,

Most [creative writing] textbooks have at least a chapter entirely devoted to “setting,” and . . . it seems an easy jump to also discuss the ways that the social and cultural features of a certain setting, along with its environmental features, affect, and are affected by, the characters. (p. 7)

Place-Based Writing Instruction for Rural Students

Some scholars of place-based pedagogy (e.g., Smith, 2002; Sobel, 1996) emphasize students’ connection to nature and the outdoors, believing that from an ecological standpoint future generations may not become adults heavily invested in protecting the environment unless they are provided opportunities to explore and care for it. This connection to nature might be stronger for rural students, who tend to live in larger spaces with more varied natural phenomena (in contrast with children who reside in urban areas, perhaps). Other scholars (e.g., Gruenewald, 2003; McInerney et al., 2011; Ruday & Azano, 2019) attend to critical aspects of place and the socioeconomic and cultural benefits of a place-based pedagogy, believing that a focus on place can help rural students view their own communities through a critical lens, thereby examining how they can effect positive change through activism and critique.

Research on Place-Based Writing

Several studies have looked at place-based writing in the elementary classroom (e.g., Charlton et al., 2014; Coleman, 2011; Comber et al., 2001). For example, Wason-Ellam (2010) used a place-based approach to enliven the literacy learning of a group of third-grade students. After sharing picture books that highlighted the beauty found in nature, the children were brought outdoors to explore their own rural community and natural surroundings, then they wrote and illustrated stories and poems in response. Because these place-based creations revealed new understandings about their students' identity, the teacher felt she was able to meet the students' learning needs more effectively (Wason-Ellam, 2010). Another group of third-grade students researched the wildlife in their community and then published a blog to help inform local residents about the plant and animal coinhabitants of the area (Duke, 2016). The authentic purpose and place-based focus of this task proved highly engaging to the student writers, highlighting the empowering nature of place-based writing.

In another study (Comber et al., 2001), the teacher of a multiage (grades 2 and 3) class led her students in conducting fieldwork and research about trees, then the class wrote letters to local government agencies asking that trees be planted to help beautify the impoverished neighborhood in which their school was located. Through writing, the teacher provided "a way to link [students'] social sense of neighborhood 'propriety' with knowledge, networks, and actions in which they took civic responsibility, worked cooperatively, and lobbied and organized as social activists" (p. 462). Similarly, a study of place-based argument writing in a rural middle school (Ruday & Azano, 2019) provided an opportunity for students to advocate for positive changes for their community. Students wrote about a wide variety of topics (e.g., the benefits of playing football despite the risks; the need to preserve a local park), illustrating the diversity of thought that exists within rural communities. One student described the authentic assignment as "writing because you have something to say" (p. 11), echoing the sentiments of Brooke (2003b), who wrote, "When teachers and students jointly connect writing education to their immediate community, to

the regional issues that shape that community, and perhaps spiraling out to [the] national and international world, then writing education becomes motivated, active, creative, and effective" (p. x).

The Role of Motivation

Although gifted children are often perceived to be highly motivated learners (e.g., Olthouse, 2014; Winner, 2000), researchers (e.g., Bennett-Rappell & Northcote, 2016) have found they sometimes struggle with motivation. Motivation research suggests that students need to feel empowered (Jones, 2018) to make choices in class assignments and to take a personal interest in the subject of study (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). Connecting the curriculum to place by allowing children to write about the places and spaces that are personally meaningful to them may be one way to increase gifted students' motivation for writing (Stanton & Sutton, 2012). In a study involving eighth-grade honors students at a rural high school, Azano (2011) found that shifting the focus of instruction to explicitly emphasize place "granted students an authorial voice, thus giving them license to create their own concepts of place" (p. 7). As part a series of studies about talented writers of different ages, Olthouse (2014) observed and conducted interviews with participants in a summer writing camp for gifted elementary school children. She found that the children were both extrinsically and intrinsically motivated to write, but that as the summer progressed the students began to take more risks in developing their stories to reflect their own personalities more closely, rather than simply adhering to "school" expectations. Olthouse concluded that gifted students of this age needed modeling and guidance, including that of sharing specific examples of complex literature as a scaffold to help them answer challenging writing prompts, even though all of the children studied were avid readers outside of school. The students thrived when allowed to choose their own topics, and they used their writing to showcase humor, visual imagery, and sophisticated syntax, all characteristics of creative writing identified by Piirto (1992).

Elementary Creative Writing

The focus of school-assigned writing tends to be nonfiction narratives and expository texts (Dyson, 2013; Graves, 1994; Williams, 2005), but students, especially as they mature in their writing capabilities (Atwell, 1998), often express a desire to craft fictional stories as well. “In many classrooms, the child who has moved from writing her own personal narrative to composing an imaginary tale has become a ‘real’ writer” (Graves, 1994, p. 287). Because gifted writers are often avid readers who spend much of their leisure time immersed in literature (Garrett & Moltzen, 2011; Olthouse, 2014), gifted elementary students may be especially inclined to try their hand at narrative fiction writing. Further, programming standards set forth by the National Association for Gifted Children (2019) require that educators of students with gifts and talents create “learning environments that encourage awareness and understanding of interest, strengths, and needs” (p. 1).

Teachers would do well to encourage students’ desires to write creatively during the school day, as practice with different writing genres improves students’ writing overall (Ferlazzo, 2015; Fletcher & Portalupi, 2000; Meier, 2011). In fact, after an extensive meta-analysis of elementary writing instruction practices across many decades, Graham et al. (2012) recommended that students use more creativity in their writing and, in general, that much more instructional time be devoted to practicing writing. Graham et al. also recommended implementing comprehensive writing programs to assist teachers in making instructional decisions for writing.

Democracy and Creativity as Theoretical Framing

The theoretical framework grounding this research combines Dewey’s (1916/1985) theory of democracy in education and Vygotsky’s (1971) theory of creativity. According to Dewey (1916/1985), increasing curricular relevance depends on students’ access to authentic learning experiences they can connect to their previous knowledge. Place-based pedagogy draws heavily from Dewey’s work. Regarding creativity, Vygotsky (1971) believed creativity is central both to an

individual’s development and to the forward momentum needed by society, and as such, artistic pursuits should be valued in schools. Further, creative achievements in any given domain are unlikely—if not impossible—if time and attention are not devoted to teaching children the sign systems and symbols of that domain so they can one day break from the domain and build on it (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). This thinking aligns with Feldman and Fowler’s (1997) theory of nonuniversal development, which asserts that certain abilities, like writing (Olthouse, 2014), are discipline specific, meaning individuals need the support and structure of a field of study to develop them. Thus, this study looked at the way a place-based pedagogy can both increase curricular relevance and foster the development of knowledge in the domain of creative writing for gifted rural elementary students.

Methods

Generation of Data

The data for this study were generated as part of a federally funded research project called Promoting PLACE (Place, Literacy, Achievement, Community, Engagement) in Rural Schools (hereafter Promoting PLACE), which had two primary goals: (a) to increase the number of students eligible for gifted services in rural schools by establishing a place-conscious alternative identification process, and (b) to investigate the impact of a place-based curriculum on students’ self-efficacy and achievement in the language arts. Researchers adapted the existing CLEAR (Challenge Leading to Engagement, Achievement, and Results) language arts curriculum for gifted students (Callahan et al., 2017) by incorporating place-based assignments and literature.

Fourteen rural school districts (as defined by population density and proximity to urban areas; National Center for Education Statistics, 2011) were recruited to participate in the Promoting PLACE project. Districts randomly assigned to the treatment condition received a place-based language arts curriculum for third- and fourth-grade gifted students. Students were identified for gifted services either by their school district or by alternative criteria established by Promoting

PLACE, which consisted of locally normed (rather than nationally normed) scores on the verbal portion of the Cognitive Abilities Test (Lohman & Hagen, 2005) and teacher ratings on three of the Scales for Rating the Behavioral Characteristics of Superior Students (Renzulli et al., 2009, 2013) after teachers received professional development on how to use the tool. For the purpose of this substudy, we did not distinguish between stories written by students identified either traditionally or by using alternative criteria. All participating school districts were considered “high need,” with at least 50% of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. In third grade, students completed units on poetry and folktales that each included an emphasis on writing. In fourth grade, students completed research and fiction units, and the data for this study included 237 narrative fiction stories composed as the culminating project of the fiction unit. Girls wrote 119 of the stories, and boys wrote 103 of the stories; gender information was missing for 15 students. Because the students in the treatment districts were the only ones to have been taught with the place-based curriculum, we do not have stories written by students in the control group who continued to receive gifted instruction in the usual manner prescribed by their school district (their participation helped establish quantitative differences on measures such as standardized test results that are unrelated to this substudy). Stories were deidentified prior to analysis, so race information for individual students was unavailable; however, three of the districts had primarily White populations, and the other three districts were more racially diverse (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).

Fiction Unit

The fiction unit consisted of 17 lessons taught to students either in the general education classroom setting or during gifted pull-out lessons. Each lesson had a different literary focus (e.g., characterization, point of view, imagery) and usually consisted of sharing excerpts from classic and modern children’s literature with a discussion of principles of fiction writing, a brief writing exercise, and a discussion of how to incorporate the skill into writing. As an example, Appendix A is an abbreviated version of lesson 2 on setting. The lessons aligned with both Common Core State

Standards (National Governors Association, 2010) and the Standards of Learning for Virginia, where most of the participants resided and which require students to “describe how the choice of language, setting, and characterization contributes to the development of a plot” (Virginia Department of Education, 2017). However, research has shown that gifted students need differentiated instruction that goes beyond state standards in promoting higher-level thinking and challenge (e.g., Callahan et al., 2015; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2002).

Hollie (2018) suggested literacy educators make every effort to share literature that represents “authentic cultural experiences” (p. 141) of various cultural groups in meaningful ways. Accordingly, much of the literature shared with students was selected because of its emphasis on place, such as *Walk Two Moons* by Sharon Creech (1994), about a girl who learns about her family’s history during a long road trip with her grandparents; *Hoot* by Carl Hiaassen (2002), about a group of friends who stop a commercial developer from destroying the home of endangered owls in rural Florida; and *My Side of the Mountain* by Jean Craighead George (1959), about a boy who learns wilderness survival skills after running away to the Catskills Mountains of New York. Choosing to use culturally relevant, place-based literature to teach language arts concepts aligns with the International Literacy Association (2010) standards, which require teachers to “use literature that reflects the experiences of marginalized groups” (element 4.2).

For the final writing assignment, students were asked to combine all the elements of fiction they learned about in the unit (imagery, setting, characterization, etc.) into one coherent fiction narrative. Students could write in any genre they chose (e.g., adventure, fantasy, realistic fiction, science fiction) and 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). They were given a rubric (see Appendix B) to refer to throughout the writing, revising, and editing processes to ensure they had included all required elements. The curriculum provided three class sessions for students to complete their stories, though teachers were

advised to allow more time if they deemed it necessary.

Data Analysis

We typed all stories to correct minor spelling and grammar mistakes, hence allowing for low-level inferences. Then, we conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) across multiple iterations to identify and categorize students' descriptions of setting. To ascertain whether the project seemed to mentor students into the field of creative writing (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Feldman & Fowler, 1997) as proposed in our theoretical framework, we focused on identifying detailed descriptions, vivid sensory images, and how the setting aided development of characters and plot. To determine the potential influence of the place-based nature of the curriculum and its potential to increase curricular relevance for students (Dewey, 1916/1985), we also searched for elements of setting specific to students' regional or rural culture, as well as choices students made about setting descriptions. Descriptive coding, which according to Saldaña (2016) "summarizes in a word or short phrase—most often a noun—the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data" (p. 102), was used to make sense of the data, and writing analytic memos helped clarify coding decisions. Using a constant comparative technique (Glaser, 1965; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) allowed for iterative comparisons among stories, coding tables, and memos to look for patterns and to refine the coding categories.

Thematic Findings

After exhausting the possibility of any new insights, the following salient themes emerged as consistent: rich descriptions of nature, encounters with new surroundings, highlighting specific spaces, depictions of rural communities, and displacement. We first describe our general findings and then discuss each theme in turn. Reading through the entire data set of 237 stories, we made note of each instance in which a rural setting was suggested through references to (a) natural elements (e.g., mountains, creeks), (b) agriculture, (c) communities

that may connote rurality (e.g., towns, villages), (d) places within a community (e.g., stores, restaurants), or (e) activities typically associated with rural places (e.g., hunting, fishing). The findings listed in Table 1 show that, when given the opportunity to craft a story in whatever genre they wanted, many students relied on their local communities and natural surroundings as settings, suggesting that they consider place to be an important part of their worldview.

As shown in Table 1, not all stories reflected rurality; some used settings that may or may not have been rural (e.g., the story took place "at home" without an indication of where the home was located), some used distinctly nonrural settings (e.g., large cities), and some used fantastical settings (e.g., outer space).

Rich Descriptions of Nature

Both Wason-Ellam (2010) and Duke (2016) demonstrated how experiences with nature can enhance elementary students' writing, and this data set included many descriptions of the natural world that revealed its importance to these fourth-grade authors as well. For example, Sally, the protagonist of "Portal to a Unicorn World,"¹ loves "to go outside and search in the woods in her backyard. And she [loves] animals so much that she could keep thousands." Melody, the protagonist of "Mermicorn," has an adventure at a lake that is "very active with fish and other wildlife." In "Magic Is Real," the narrator describes a "crisp and cool evening" in the forest, where "the sounds of all the critters filled the air, the chirping of the crickets, the croaking of the toads in the pond nearby, and the hooting of the owls hunting." Skillfully, the narrator of "The Mythical Forest" opens with these lines:

I hear the whistling wind. I feel the grass on my legs and I see the wide spread of forest. As I walk through the dark forest, I hear something rustling in the leaves beside me. As I turn, I watch as a small bunny runs by and hops toward the forest.

¹ Most of the story titles given in this article were student generated, but we also assigned titles to several stories that were originally untitled.

Table 1*Types of Settings Used by Rural Gifted Students in Their Culminating Fiction Unit Project*

Setting	Subsetting	No.
Rural settings		
Natural areas	Woods/forest	42
	Mountains	6
	Caves	8
	Open areas of land (e.g., meadows, fields)	6
	Trails	6
	Small Bodies of water (e.g., ponds, lakes)	9
Agricultural areas	Farms/farmland	12
	Gardens	3
Small communities (e.g., towns, villages, neighborhoods)		20
Places around town (e.g., hospitals, stores, restaurants)		25
Rural activities	Fishing	4
	Hunting	7
	Foraging	2
	Camping	6
	Farm chores	3
	Neutral (not necessarily rural) settings	
"At home"		34
"At school"		38
No indication of location		7
Nonrural settings		
Large cities		25
Beaches ^a		6
Tropical islands		9
Ocean/sea ^a		10
Military bases/battlefields ^a		4
Fantastical Settings		
Kingdoms		18
Fantasy worlds		14
Video game worlds		5
Outer space		2

^aWhile beach, ocean, and military references could have been considered rural in some cases, as one of the school sites was located in a seaside area near a military base, they were not categorized as such in this analysis.

The author of "Farm Rainstorm" expertly sets the scene for the story, situating it in a place likely very familiar to her: "It was a boiling hot day in Kentucky. Fourteen-year-old Hannah walked to the barn to do her farm chores. She stopped and felt a breeze. The yellow and green grass swayed. 'It might actually rain!' Hannah said with relief."

A notable description of nature is found in "The Vines Come Alive," showing both a remarkably strong connection between the author and his natural surroundings and a high level of skill with manipulating language to paint a vivid picture of the story's setting:

I stood on the top of the tall mountain, relishing every minute, every second, every moment. The cool breeze against my face, the wind toying with my umber-colored hair and the warm glow of the sun warming my skin. . . . When I was surrounded by nature, by vines, trees, flowers, valleys, rivers, and the forest teeming with life; when I was far away from everyone. . . .

I sat down. I sat for a long, long time, watching the sun climb slowly up into the sky, its warm glow radiating onto the earth. A rock wren landed beside me, cocking its head. I smiled, watching it as it hopped back and forth before spreading its wings and flying off. I sighed. . . .

My observant eyes and patience caught movements commonly unnoticed. I saw the sparrows collecting twigs and leaves for their nests, leaves falling from trees, squirrels storing nuts for the winter and ants working hard to build homes, bit by bit, one step at a time.

A piece titled “Dew on the Horizon” was not truly a narrative fiction story containing characters and a plot; rather, it was more of a poem about the changing seasons as experienced in the author’s place, and it demonstrates the closeness this student felt with the outdoor world:

As the reddish, yellow sun came up on the fall horizon, I saw dew sticking on the ground, the trees, and the faded black panels of my backyard shed. The dew looked like it was dancing on the things it was stuck to. It was one elegant sight indeed. I saw many other great things, squirrels running up and down the trees and birds tending to their young. . . . The animals are preparing for winter and storing all their food. Soon, they will go to sleep and continue the circle of life.

Encounters With New Surroundings

Many times in these stories, the characters find themselves in unfamiliar places, and the authors impressively described the new surroundings through the characters’ eyes. For example, in the historical fiction story “The Path to Freedom,” Jacques is a French youth seeking a new life in America after having woken up in an alleyway with

“no last name and no money.” He boards a ship, described as follows:

The inside was brightly-lit and the floor had a red carpet. . . . On a table to my left was a map of the ship. I picked it up and looked at it. I saw that I was near the dining room and the first-class rooms. . . . The map said the entrance to go there was on the other side of the ship, so I started to walk in that direction. After a lot of walking and getting lost a few times, I got there. . . . It was beautiful. The water was as clear as the blue sky and there was a gentle breeze.

Later that night, Jacques must find a hidden place to sleep, and he remembers the tarp-covered lifeboats he noticed during his earlier exploration. When he arrives in New York City, Jacques still has no place to call his own, but kind strangers eventually rescue him from perpetual displacement by welcoming him into their family and home.

In “The Trouble Maker,” Tiana is a misunderstood preteen who has alienated her family, her teachers, and her classmates after repeatedly failing to follow social norms. As a result, she is sent away to a boot camp for troubled youth, and in her description of Tiana’s first impressions of the place, the author juxtaposes Tiana’s internal conflict—the shame she feels at having been sent to such a place—against the sensory details of the natural surroundings she can’t seem to avoid noticing, even in her distress:

As we got closer, there were more trees, and the road started to get bumpier. Finally, we arrived at boot camp. My boot camp teacher greeted me with a simple, “Hello, how are you?” I didn’t answer any of her questions. I just wanted to crawl back into the van and go back home. I didn’t even make eye contact [or] look at the other kids, I just looked down in shame. There was a breeze blowing in the trees. A squirrel caught my attention as it was leaping from tree to tree. A frog jumped on my leg.

The protagonist of “Dragonwings,” Dawn, is a young dragon about to embark on a journey to the Altar of Darkness for “historic research,” an apparent rite of passage among her dragon community. The author does a remarkable job of

describing the uneasiness Dawn feels upon preparing to leave her familiar surroundings for an unknown place:

Dawn walked through her cave at Mt. Emerald. Sunlight streamed through the holes in the ceiling. She rummaged through her storage chest. *Let's see*, Dawn thought as she put items in her bag. Fruit, cloak, and a scroll with info about where they were going. . . . Dawn shook out her wings and took a deep breath. Then she swished her curtain open and met her friends outside.

The story "Cardinal's Journey" featured a male cardinal as a protagonist who must endure a harrowing ordeal to protect his partner from a "rogue hunter" who was invading their habitat, but unlike Tiana and Dawn in the previous examples, he does not have time to entertain any trepidation he might feel:

The cardinal tried to lure away the hunter. He flew deeper and deeper and further and further away from his home. Little did he or the hunter know they were heading straight into a blizzard. Suddenly, a frigid blast of the coldest air blew him to the ground. He lay there unconscious until morning. He awoke under a pile of snow with only his beak showing. He jumped out of the snow, surprised to find frost on his wings. He tried to shake off the frost so he could fly, but it didn't work. He sat in the sun, which warmed his feathers and thawed his frost. He was able to fly home to his beloved wife.

This story not only demonstrates the student author's skill in describing a scene using powerful details like "a frigid blast of the coldest air," but it also shows strong evidence of his rural knowledge about hunting regulations when, at the end of the story, the hunter is arrested for pursuing a state bird. Similarly, the author of "My Lucky Day" demonstrates his own understanding of the rules of hunting when he describes how his protagonist's uncle stops him from shooting a buck during his first hunting trip:

While we were walking in the woods, I saw a 12-pointer and whispered, "Look." We all saw

the deer, but the deer did not see us. I was about to shoot it, but my uncle didn't let me.

"Why can't I shoot it?" I said.

"Because this section isn't my land."

The narrator goes on to describe "the best hunting spot ever," which included a hunting stand that was so well camouflaged the boy did not even see it at first.

Highlighting Specific Spaces

In many stories, the authors established the tone for their stories by including distinct details about very specific spaces. For example, in "Cruise Ship Disaster," when teenage brothers Paul and Jeff sneak aboard the ship on which their parents are vacationing, they hide behind a safe in the stateroom's closet, first arranging one set of clean blankets on which to lie and folding a second set to use as pillows. From this position, the boys overhear their parents' plans. While the same plot point could have been accomplished by simply stating that they hid in the closet, the addition of the extra details about the blankets and safe help the reader visualize the story and understand that the boys are somewhat finicky about ensuring they have a relatively comfortable place in which to hide out. Similarly, in "The Vengeful Twins," Jamie sits in his "tattered green armchair, drinking a cup of coffee" while he waits for his evil sister, Jane, to come confront him during a violent thunderstorm. The addition of these small details shows the reader that Jamie is calm and steady, in sharp contrast to his twin, whose cruel ways and heightened emotions were detailed previously in the story. The sophisticated way these young authors describe small details about the setting to establish the story's tone and characters' personalities strongly suggests their potential to become accomplished creative writers one day. The opportunity provided by the Promoting PLACE intervention to develop and practice these skills under a teacher's guidance aligns with Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) notion of the necessity of learning a field (in this case, creative writing) to be able to innovate in that field later on.

The description of the path and front entrance of the school two sisters are about to explore in "Haunted School" helps the reader understand that trouble lies ahead: "It took about thirty minutes to go

down the deserted stone path, with cracks in the stones. We reached the school and we both looked up at the tall, broken, broken, broken bricks, and vines hanging from a banner.” In “Mannequin School,” another story about children venturing into an abandoned school building, the author describes how a group of four friends decides exactly where they will sleep within the “least moldy” classroom they could find:

Molly was going to sleep in the corner by the chalkboard. John was going to sleep by the window in case he needed to get out in an emergency. Billy was going to sleep by the old, dusty rocking chair. He sat in it and one of the legs completely broke off. Joyce was going to sleep by the old bookshelf. She pulled a book off the shelf and blew on it to get the dust off. It said that it was published in 1887.

Joyce not only notices the book was dusty, but she also blows off the dust to reveal the book’s publication date, a tiny detail that both adds depth to the story and provides a meaningful clue about the predicament in which the children later find themselves. In a different scene set in the school’s vast library, Molly, who is blind, finds a book written in Braille titled *How to Train Your Horse*, which once again adds a layer of detail (a realistic title for a book written in the late 1800s) above and beyond what one might expect of a fourth-grade writer.

In a story called “The Bridge,” another author foreshadows a later discovery—that the “older man dressed like a farmer” whom the protagonist meets on a stormy night is really a ghost—by describing the paint on his old farmhouse as “weathered and chipping off” and the porch as looking “like someone would fall right through it.” In “Bootsy’s Adventures,” another dilapidated building is described as “a worn-out barn with cracked windows” that “looked like it was about to fall at any moment.” Bootsy, an almost-grown cat, remarks that the inside of the structure was “the perfect setting to watch a horror movie,” once again setting the stage for troubling events.

The author of “Family Always Comes First” uses the description of a ghost’s home to reveal information about him; the personality of his new friend, Maria, who is seeing the house for the first time; and the tension between Maria and her

brother, Jack, whom she has left behind in the human world:

Bob lived in a small cottage with hundreds of wood carvings piled to the ceiling and surrounding the charming cottage. For carving wood is what he loved to do. That, and of course, making and eating ice cream.

When they arrived at the cottage, Maria was amazed. All she wanted to do was stare. The wonderfully careless cottage was like a vacation from her tidy brother Jack.

“Your cottage is amazing!” said Maria.

“You really like it?” Bob said cheerfully.

“No, Bob, I love it,” said Maria.

Bob’s cheeks turned rosy red, and with that, they headed into the cottage to enjoy some homemade ice cream.

Rather than living in a dusty, abandoned home more typical of literary ghosts, the author reveals Bob’s whimsical personality by describing his handcrafted carvings, his love of culinary ice cream pursuits, and the bashful pride he shows when Maria compliments his home. “Wonderfully careless” is an inventive way to describe Bob’s unique style, and the fact that Maria enjoys being there so much because it is “like a vacation from her tidy brother” clues the reader into the opposing personality traits that cause conflict between the two siblings.

The author of “Hill Valley Kingdom” embeds rural values into his story about a dedicated royal servant who relies on his wilderness knowledge to forge past multiple obstacles to protect the king during a hostile takeover by an evil warlock. Before embarking on his treacherous journey, Brandon thinks to grab his cloak, his bow and arrow, a “deer knife,” and some leftover deer meat. He uses the meat to distract a hungry wolf, the knife to kill some ominous snakes, and the cloak to protect his body from angry bees. When some of the bees do sting him, he uses “salve from a thistle” to ease the pain. Upon arriving at the castle, Brandon steadies his bow and arrow, draws back, and aims for the evil warlock’s amulet, which he hits on the first try, saving the day for the whole kingdom. Clearly, by sharing such detailed descriptions of his character’s ability to navigate through the woods using hunting

tools and a keen understanding of the plants and animals he encounters, the author communicates his appreciation for these representations of his own rural place, thus demonstrating Dewey's (1916/1985) ideas about how centering the curriculum in place can help students connect with school assignments.

Depictions of Rural Communities

Azano (2011) described how one rural English teacher and his students shared an idealized view of their community, with the teacher explaining that the community is made up of "neighbors, family members, and friends who are readily available to lend help when it is needed" (p. 5) and people who always greet each other with a friendly wave. Several students in this study depicted the communities in their stories in a similar manner, such as in "A Breakup in the Woods," when the narrator describes the fictional small town of Skyville as being "known for everybody to be happy and kind." Another example of a lovely community is Unicorpia, a "happy forest" full of fluffy pink trees where "everyone and everything was so joyful. Nothing was sad or hateful. Everyone got along just fine. It was perfect. Nothing ever went wrong" ("The Adventures of Unicorpia, Book One"). Similarly, the narrator of "The Night Is Against You" sets the scene for the story as follows:

Long ago, it was a normal day in the town of Hanfed. The newspaper boy was in the middle of his morning shift, every towns person was out greeting each other even if they did not know the person they were greeting. The town of Hanfed was a small town right next to the woods. It had a population of only about 60 people, so when a woman in the town had a baby, everyone would come to the baby shower.

The description of the whole community gathering for a baby shower is strikingly similar to the way Heath (1983) describes women of all generations gathering to shower new mothers with gifts and advice in her classic ethnography of two rural communities.

In the fantastical tale of "The Ol' Cracken," Captain Gray Beard gathers the community at "the

tallest conifer tree on the island" to discuss how to solve the problem of the "Ol' Cracken," a sea monster who has been attacking ships for years: "At around 7:30, everyone from the island showed up, which looked to be about 30 people because it was a very small island." After they pulled together and defeated the monster, "they all met back up at the conifer tree for a great celebration. They had a colossal feast. There was music and dancing around a warm fire. They celebrated [til] into the morning as elation filled the air."

"Hill Valley Kingdom" was set in a land ruled by a king who "used his crown for the good of his people and his kingdom. With the help of his crown, he made sure the crops grew, there was enough food for everyone, and no one was sick. The kingdom was peaceful." In "The Meaning of the Necklace," the author promotes the virtue of an honest day's labor, a value typically embraced as part of rural culture (Azano, 2011). The story's two princess characters extoll the virtues of hard, physical work "in the fields" when, during a long search for a magic necklace that would transform one of them into the queen of the land, they stop to live "alongside all the poor people" for a while and then decide to stay permanently. "They worked hard, and knew what hunger was, and how life could be so difficult, but people loved them so much that they came to be very happy." The people they meet in the humble village treat the princesses with kindness, which in turn leads them to appreciate a simpler way of life.

Displacement

Like the story of Jacque in "The Path to Freedom," discussed above, several stories involved a character moving or having just moved to a new place, and in each situation, characters struggle either to say goodbye to the place they had lived or to adjust to the new place. For example, in "The Turn on the Bullies," Bob is a boy whose family has moved repeatedly, and on his first day of school in their new town he witnesses a group of bullies harassing another student. In that moment, Bob chooses to align himself with the boy who was bullied rather than the group of bullies, thereby asserting agency by choosing to shape his role in his new place into that of protector. In some stories,

(e.g., “BFF Moves to China”), it is the protagonist’s friend who moves away, and the anxiety felt by the character left behind demonstrates another way students feel the people around them shape their sense of place. Without the home and people they are used to, their characters feel lost, and they need to find a way to construct a sense of connectedness to their new place.

In another story, “Moving to L.A.,” a young girl, Crissy, is alarmed when her parents suddenly announce their family will be moving from Sacramento to Los Angeles. Crissy feels powerless when her parents shut down all conversation about the move before she has any time to process the news. In moving to Los Angeles, Crissy has to say goodbye to her friends and teachers—the community that makes up a “place” as much as the actual physical surroundings (Azano, 2011; Brooke, 2003a; Esposito, 2012). Leaving her school for the last time, Crissy looks back sadly at the rock where she used to sit and eat yogurt with her friends, as if to acknowledge that this space she values no longer belongs to her.

Additionally, there were dozens of stories in which characters suddenly move from one place to another via teleportation. For example, in “Off to Australia,” Ruby is on vacation with her father when she falls through a portal, eventually landing in “some type of mystical land.” Similarly, in “The Mystical Forest,” Julie meets a fairy in the woods and follows her to a tree that turns out to be a portal to a magical world. In each case, the characters who have teleported feel unease at their sudden shift in place and must quickly adjust. In most of these stories, the characters have an adventure in this new place and then eventually return to the safety and familiarity of home. In fact, 46 of the 237 stories (19%) involved characters embarking on both voluntary and involuntary adventures and then ending up safely “back home.” The idea that so many students used a sense of displacement as a central problem to be resolved in their stories echoes and supports previous research indicating place is a critical component of identity (e.g., Azano, 2011; Brooke, 2003a; Donovan, 2016; Jacobs, 2011; Sobel, 1996).

Discussion: Promising Practices

Vygotsky (1971) theorized that creativity was crucial to the development of both the individual and of the society to which the individual belongs. According to Vygotsky, creative practices like the ones undertaken by student participants in this project allow for growth and change, disrupting societal inertia and forcing us “to strive beyond our life toward all that lies beyond it” (p. 253). Creative projects like the one discussed in this article provide gifted students opportunities to consider different ways of being and knowing they may not otherwise have. This is especially important for rural gifted students, who “may be at risk for not having their academic needs met” (Azano, 2014a, p. 299) and who deserve every opportunity to be challenged creatively.

Dyson (2008) wrote that “as children participate in social activities involving text, they come to anticipate not only written language’s functional possibilities, but also locally valued ways of doing, being, and relating to others” (p. 121). Because students were taught to understand place as a valuable part of their identities through the reading, writing, and class discussions embedded in the Promoting PLACE curriculum, and because they explored place-related concepts in their descriptions of setting, this study supports Dyson’s assertion by demonstrating the importance of connecting language arts instruction to rural students’ sense of place.

Further, according to Dyson (2013), “Writing is never an individual production. Rather, it is always socially organized in cultural time and space, and it is also always a response to a landscape of others’ voices” (p. 76). Thus, this study supports research showing that literature shared with students as part of their language arts learning is reflected in their writing (e.g., Calkins, 2003; McKay et al., 2017; Muhammad, 2020). It is beneficial to share books in which students are interested, and one of the premises of the larger Promoting PLACE project, of which this study is a part, was that rural students would be interested in literature with a focus on place. Because many of the students’ descriptions of setting were so strong, this study indicates that a place-based curriculum emphasizing literature set

in rural spaces may have helped foster the development of such impressive writing. Therefore, rural literacy educators may want to consider curating gifted students' in-school reading experiences in such a way as to inspire their students as writers. Further, to bolster their own repertoires of place-based literature so they will be able to recommend stories to their gifted students, rural teachers can consult literacy journals, attend reading conferences, and seek help from school librarians (Azano, 2014b). Additionally, they can advocate for a predeveloped place-based language arts curriculum to follow with gifted students, such as the one used in this project, which previous research has shown to be "more likely to produce improvements in student growth" than models that only provide a guide in developing daily lessons (Plucker & Callahan, 2014, p. 395).

The type of creative writing described in this study, according to Dobson and Stephenson (2017), is best nurtured when the task and learning environment are simultaneously structured and flexible. In this case the writing assignment was structured (it included a rubric to follow) but with embedded flexibility (students could craft a creative story in whatever genre they chose). This pedagogical balance between structure and freedom, then, "provide[s] textual space for writers to enact different identities" (Dobson & Stephenson, 2017, p. 162). In other words, providing space and time for students to create stories as they did during this project is valuable for gifted rural students' growth as literate individuals in the midst of the ongoing process of identity formation. It is valuable, too, for enhancing their connections both to the larger literate world and to the social world of their own classrooms, which are each situated within a particular local context.

Conclusion

Of the younger students she observed in her ethnographic studies of elementary writing, Dyson (2013) wrote, "The children were not only socialized into official practices, but they also exercised agency; they used familiar frames of reference—familiar practices—to give these new school demands relevance and meaning in their ongoing lives" (p. 164). This study extends Dyson's findings

to the context of place-based writing instruction with gifted rural fourth graders: students were socialized into official writing practices (addressing state standards for writing), exercised agency (choosing what type of stories to write and crafting the stories' outcomes), and used familiar frames of reference (connections to rurality and place) to give the school demands (the mastery of writing skills) relevance and meaning to their lives.

In her study of talented elementary writers, Olthouse (2014) found they were strongly influenced by their teachers, who offered useful conceptual and technical feedback on their writing and encouraged them to pursue opportunities to continue developing their writing talent. Rural students with immense talent, like the authors of some of these stories, should be encouraged to enter writing contests and to apply for scholarships that provide direct support for writing or for attendance at writing camps. Their future teachers should be alerted to their aptitude for writing so they can continue to cultivate and nurture it. In that way, students, having learned and internalized the symbols within the domain of creative writing, would be capable of contributing to the domain one day in the manner described by Csikszentmihalyi (1996). These children, after all, are our future authors! Among them might be the next Willa Cather, Jesmyn Ward, Louise Erdrich, Jason Reynolds, or Carl Hiassen. By nurturing these gifts and teaching them to write from a perspective that values place, teachers of gifted rural students prepare and empower them to tell their own stories—to "construct authentic rural narratives that honor the complexities of rural people and places" (Azano, 2014b, p. 62).

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Appendix A

Promoting PLACE, Lesson 2 (Abbreviated)

Big Idea: Writers use senses, emotions, and images to evoke connections between the text and the reader.

OBJECTIVES:

- Use evidence from text to support opinions
- Make personal connections to fictional narratives
- Respond to a prompt creatively and thoughtfully
- Use descriptive language appropriately

Important Vocabulary

Setting: “The time, place, and circumstances in which a narrative, drama, or film takes place.” (*American Heritage Dictionary*)

Allow 5–10 minutes for students to respond to the following writing prompt:

Choose one of the five senses. In approximately 100 words, describe what you had for lunch today.

When students finish, have them take some time to look over their work and consider any revisions they might want to make (e.g., look for ways to use more imagery, use stronger words, incorporate the perspective from another sense if they are ready, etc.).

INTRODUCTION: What Is Setting?

*Now we’re going to move on to our next area of focus: setting. How do we define **setting** again? (Allow for responses.) In fiction, we sometimes use time and places that are real, and sometimes we use time and places that are made up. Even though we can use real times and places in fiction, we always make up what happens to the characters. Keep this in mind as we read this passage from *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.*

APPLICATION: Setting

Invite students to find a comfortable place for listening. Remind students to enjoy the way the passage sounds but to listen for details about the setting, particularly any sensory imagery they notice.

Project the first passage from *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. Read it out loud to students. Make sure you highlight the idea of resiliency, which is key to the setting. Explain how overcoming obstacles like the difficult background and inequality (shown in the description of the neighborhood) is seen through the tree. This makes it a symbol of resiliency. Ask: *In what ways are we like the tree? What examples of resiliency do you have from your own life?*

Ask: *What is our setting? How does it differ from where Francie lives? How is it the same?* Make a list of students’ responses, either on a SMART Board template that you can save or on a piece of chart paper that you can use again in the next lesson.

Appendix B

Promoting PLACE Fiction Scoring Rubric

	You need to go back to the drawing board	You need multiple revisions	You need one more revision	Your work is publishable!
Alignment NOTE: “story elements” refers to all the elements listed below!	None of the story elements are consistent or make sense.	Some of the story elements are consistent and make sense.	Most of the story elements are consistent and make sense.	All the story elements are consistent and make sense.
Characters ^a	There are no characters developed enough to be a protagonist/antagonist/stock character.	The protagonist/antagonist are underdeveloped. The stock character serves no purpose.	The protagonist/antagonist are identifiable. The stock character has a debatable purpose.	The protagonist/antagonist are well developed. The stock character serves a clear purpose.
Characterization	Either direct or indirect characterization is missing.	There is an uneven balance between direct and indirect characterization that is distracting to the reader.	The direct and/or indirect characterization are developed but inconsistent.	Both direct and indirect characterization are consistent and well developed.
Conflict	There is no major conflict.	The major conflict is unclear.	The major conflict is identifiable.	The major conflict is clearly identifiable and well-developed.
Dialogue	There is no dialogue, even when it would be relevant.	There is dialogue, but there are issues with punctuation.	The dialogue does not seem authentic to the characters.	The dialogue flows well and is authentic to the characters.
Imagery	There is no imagery.	The imagery is confusing and does not seem related to story elements.	The imagery does not always fit with the other story elements.	The imagery fits well with the other story elements.
Plot	The plot is hard to follow.	There are gaps in the plot.	There are minor points of confusion in the plot.	The plot is clear and easy to follow.
Point of view	The point of view switches narrators at random.	The point of view inconsistent and confusing at times.	The point of view is clear, though there are minor issues with consistency.	The point of view is clear and consistent.
Publication details (e.g., cover, title page, dedication, author biography)	The publication elements are missing or completely incorrect.	The publication elements are incorrect.	The publication elements are misleading (inconsistent between content of story and what is presented).	The publication elements are clearly marketing the story appropriately.
Setting	The setting is never clarified.	There are missing details about the setting, without a reason.	Some details of the setting are inconsistent.	The setting is clear and consistent.

^a Not all students will have stock character(s) in their stories. Disregard the rubric section about this element if they do not.