

# The Possibility of Place: One Teacher's Use of Place-Based Instruction for English Students in a Rural High School

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*Educational practices that purposely seek to tie the realities of place to instruction, particularly for the purpose of student engagement, are typically referred to as place-based education. This study investigates how one teacher considered place in making instructional choices for eighth grade English students in a rural high school, and students' perceptions of this teacher's place-based instruction. Findings indicate that the teacher initially used his own understanding of place to activate students' prior knowledge. Additionally, when the teacher used place-based content to mediate instruction rather than his personal experience, students were able to construct their own understandings of place. While findings indicate that place-based strategies may increase curricular relevance, they also signal that without a critical lens rural students may be hindered in their capacity to identify and analytically interpret the challenges affecting their communities and the structures that serve to reproduce inequalities. The study concludes with a critique of the learning experience and makes suggestions for implementing a critical pedagogy of place in the English classroom.*

Rural education advocates stress the importance of research in rural schools (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Coladarci, 2007) to address factors that potentially compromise the quality of education for rural students, such as funding inequities (Jimerson, 2005; Mathis, 2003), limited access to educational resources (Gibbs, 1998), and rural poverty (Johnson & Strange, 2005). While these challenges persist, place-based pedagogy responds to the challenges in rural schools by promoting curricular relevance for rural students. Place-based advocates contend that rural students are deeply tied to locality by their "sense of place," which Hutchinson (2004) describes as a constructed reality "informed by the unique experiences, histories, motives, and goals that each of us brings to the spaces with which we identify" (p. 11). Therefore, place-based education seeks to ground learning in "local phenomena and students' lived experience" (Smith, 2002, p. 586).

Rural schools tend to have strong community ties (Barley & Beesley, 2007), and yet there is a perceived trade-off for many rural families in educational attainment: valuing education at the expense of devaluing or undermining community. The Economic Research Service (2003) advocates for improved quality of education in rural areas, arguing it is essential for the overall well-being of rural populations. However, community members often resist, possibly because young people in rural areas who leave for

college rarely return:

For many rural places, the loss of young adults who attend college is the primary agent of human capital change. Indeed, for rural counties the connection between education and migration presents a dilemma: do they educate their children well, only to have them leave? (Gibbs, 1998, p. 61)

Howley, Harmon, & Leopold (1996) explain that rural students aspiring to an education after high school may have to "give up" their cultural heritage. Budge (2006) suggests that place-conscious pedagogy should capitalize on anti-oppressive education, arguing that certain characteristics—including poverty and geographic isolation—have created apathetic rural students who often question the reasons for attending school. Given these unique complexities in rural communities, this study investigated whether place-based instruction can promote the relevance of an education while also affirming the value of the local community.

Many educators using place in the rural classroom do so as a way of increasing relevance. Keller (1983) defines relevance as "a learner's perception that important personal needs are being met by the learning situation" (p. 406). While motivation and student engagement are heavily represented in the research (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008), there is little on relevance and its connection to student learning. Appleton et al. (2008) identify relevance as an important construct in the classroom in their comprehensive review of the literature on student engagement. They examine motivation theory to define the boundaries of

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engagement, defining engagement as a multidimensional construct consisting of behavioral, affective, and cognitive components. According to their review, relevance is best situated in the cognitive domain which speaks to an internal form of engagement and the associated behaviors, such as valuing or appreciating the content.

Hardré and Reeve (2003) also found support for increasing content relevance as a motivational model for preventing rural students from dropping out of high school. Using the theory of self-determination to explore the conditions under which rural students persist in high school (as opposed to dropping out), they verified that student engagement increases when the curriculum is relevant to students' lives and affirms their competencies. This has practical implications for rural teachers: where they are unable to control larger, external factors, such as funding and geographic isolation, rural teachers still can establish a learning climate that nurtures competence and supports student autonomy by "providing classroom climates in which teachers offer their students choices and options, respect students' agendas, acknowledge their feelings and questions, and offer learning activities relevant to students' goals and aspirations" (p. 355). Their recommendations support further studies focused on understanding student perceptions of relevance, and, in the case of this study, the relevance of place-based content.

### Place-based Education

While the term "place-based" education may be relatively new, the philosophical underpinnings of experiential learning and teaching the whole child are not, dating back to Dewey's assertion that education should "deepen and extend [a student's] sense of the values bound up in his home life" (1929, p. 19). Eliot Wigginton actualized this value in the late 1960s as he struggled to engage his English students in Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School in Georgia. To encourage their participation in the learning process, Wigginton gave his students tape recorders and sent them out into the local community. His students interviewed residents and produced *Foxfire*, a project which illuminated local culture and spawned many other projects focusing on place as a learning laboratory.

Wigginton (1985) did not come to his work as a researcher. Rather, like many teachers, he searched for innovative ways to engage students in the English classroom. And while his model of a place-based English curriculum pre-dated No Child Left Behind and therefore was never challenged by the current realities of high-stakes testing, it still serves as model for incorporating community knowledge into the language arts classroom. Place-based projects (Brooke, 2003; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Haas & Nachtigal, 1998; Theobald, 1997; Wigginton, 1985) and their anecdotally reported success suggest that empirical investigations in the field of place-based education are warranted.

This study investigates how one teacher considered

place in making instructional choices for eighth grade English students in a rural high school and student perceptions of this teacher's place-based instruction.

### Theoretical Framework: A Critical Pedagogy of Place

Paulo Freire's dialogue with Macedo (Freire & Macedo, 1987) stressed the importance of reading the "word" (dominant culture texts) and the "world" (the context in which one experiences these texts), and argued that these dual acts were needed for individuals to participate meaningfully in society (e.g., voting in an election). Freire asserted that literacy equals power, and that "new literacy programs must be largely based on the notion of emancipatory literacy" (p. 157). This concept of literacy resonated for English educators in the U.S., and there is continued support for broader definitions of literacy, such as the one set forth by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), which states that "the twenty-first century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies. These literacies—from reading online newspapers to participating in virtual classrooms—are multiple, dynamic, and malleable" (NCTE, 2008). Consistent with Freire's argument that literacy instruction must extend beyond the classroom and into the economic, social, and political realm, the NCTE's revised definition suggests, too, that literacy instruction must be about more than reading and writing. Students in poorly funded rural schools may lack experiential resources to keep pace with these newly defined 21<sup>st</sup> century literacies.

This gap between mainstream literacy expectations and the reality of poorly funded rural schools is a fitting place for the application of critical theory. Noting the lack of a specific theoretical framework in place-based education, Gruenewald (2003) suggested a convergence of critical theory and place-based education into a critical pedagogy of place. Like critical theory, a critical pedagogy of place contends that education is political and that learners should be engaged in what Freire calls *conscientizacao*, or critical consciousness. Gruenewald argues that this transformation is contextualized by place and capitalizes on the substantive theory of critical pedagogy by adding place as a framework for investigating the "place-specific nexus between environment, culture, and education" (p. 10). While qualitative research tends to yield largely descriptive findings, this theoretical framework calls for an evaluative stance on the use of place to understand its potential for engaging students in emancipatory literacy instruction.

### Methodology

#### Site

Purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2008) was used to identify a classroom at Blue Valley High School<sup>1</sup> (BVHS)

<sup>1</sup>Pseudonyms were assigned to places and participants.

as the site for data collection. BVHS sits off a two-lane road, flanked by expansive fields dotted with churches, barns, and cattle. Along the winding state highway are an assortment of ranch-style houses, trailers, and historic farmhouses interspersed with local businesses, such as a family owned convenience store and a flea market site. With the football field in the foreground, the high school is perched on a hill at the base of the Appalachian Mountains, looking across the highway onto miles of meadows and cow pastures. With three feeder elementary schools, BVHS serves roughly 750 students in grades 8 – 12, with approximately 40% Title I students who receive free or reduced lunch. The student body is predominantly White, with fewer than 20 minority students and only five English language learners.

BVHS serves residents in and around the two rural communities of Slocum and Sweet Bay. According to the 2000 report from the U.S. Census Bureau, Slocum's population was approximately 1,300 and Sweet Bay's was 2,000. The school made adequate yearly progress (AYP), as delineated by NCLB, for the 2008-2009 school year, and is currently fully accredited; however, the school division itself, of which BVHS is a part, did not make AYP.

### Participants

Ed Schaffer is a teacher at BVHS. I first met Mr. Schaffer in the spring of 2008 while I conducted a qualitative research study as part of my doctoral coursework. In working with him, I found that he commonly used aspects of the local, rural context to bridge gaps in his students' understandings of various texts, thus making him an appropriate candidate to participate in this study. He is a White secondary English teacher in his mid-40s and has taught in Blue Valley for 21 years. He has lived in Slocum his entire life, residing now in his grandparents' former home. Once the teacher respondent was identified, I used snowball sampling (Creswell, 2008) by asking Mr. Schaffer to identify the students for the study. Because of the demands on his time and the press of the state's high-stakes exam, Mr. Schaffer chose his second period eighth grade honors class for the study, believing they were the only ones who could "afford" time away from the standard curriculum. The class was comprised of 24 White students (16 girls and 8 boys), the classroom teacher, and an aide who assisted a physically disabled student. All but two students had lived in Blue Valley all their lives.

After three 50-minute class observations and data analysis of students' initial place responses (the first assignment from day one of the study), I relied on opportunistic sampling (Creswell, 2008) to identify 10 participants for student interviews. This sampling strategy allows the researcher to "take advantage of unfolding events that will help answer research questions" (p. 216). To that end, Mr. Schaffer and I shared our perceptions of increased (or high) student engagement during day one of the unit, as well as students' written responses to the initial assignment.

Only five of the 10 students returned signed consent forms and were interviewed. Students were willing to speak with me but reported that they forgot their consent forms and, after multiple attempts and reminders, I was unable to recruit additional students for one-on-one interviews.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data collection included classroom observations, formal and informal interviews, and related documents (e.g., student writing and state standards). As suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), data collection occurred in three phases. During Phase 1, "orientation and overview," I conducted three consecutive 50-minute classroom observations and an initial interview with Mr. Schaffer (following day one of the unit). The second phase, "focused exploration," led to continued classroom observations (three 50-minute class periods and two other observations accounting for 25 minutes of classroom observation), five student interviews (10 – 20 minutes each), and one 3-hour interview with the teacher. At the teacher's suggestion, student interviews were conducted during class as students were unlikely to come during lunch or have transportation to stay after school. Throughout Phase 3, "member checks and closure," I consistently debriefed with the classroom teacher to compare perceptions and understandings of classroom activities. I worked closely with the classroom teacher to ensure that assertions seemed plausible by explicitly discussing findings as they emerged. Finally, I conducted three additional 50-minute class observations and met with the teacher for a final 1-hour interview to discuss the study and findings. These member checks served to confirm or disconfirm findings and to ensure a complete description and fair interpretation of the findings (Creswell, 2008). Documents were collected throughout all three phases.

Using Spradley's (1980) observation matrix to frame initial observations, I took notes on the *space* of the classroom, *objects* of the curriculum, and *activities* of the teacher and students. I designed an observation protocol that investigated 1) how the teacher implemented place-based instruction as he defined it, 2) how the teacher facilitated place-based learning to accomplish instructional objectives, and 3) how students responded to these instructional choices.

Interviews adhered to Patton's (1990) recommendation for open-ended questions and aimed to meet Kvale's (1996) quality criteria. To that end, I relied on Spradley's (1980) model of ethnographic interviewing that helps to "unpack" concepts for the interviewees. This was especially important when interviewing students, as I was unable to simply ask students how they felt about "place," or what they thought about living in a rural area. Rather, I moved those concepts from the abstract to the concrete, e.g., "How would you describe Blue Valley to someone who's never been here?" Spradley's framework for descriptive,

mini-tour, and example questions served that purpose. All formal interviews were audio taped, and I followed-up with participants in “debriefing sessions” to clarify observations during instruction. The teacher interview protocol sought to address why and how the classroom teacher included place as part of secondary English instruction. The student interview protocol addressed student perceptions of place-based instruction. The interview questions were largely informed by my observations during place-based instruction and by student products (e.g., student poems) collected during that instruction.

I collected place texts as they related to my observations. These documents included texts used by the teacher during instruction (e.g., excerpts from novels) and student documents (e.g., poems) produced during that instruction. In representing student texts in this study, I used low-level inferences to correct obvious spelling and grammar issues (e.g., a student’s misuse of there/their or your/you’re). I also referenced the eighth grade standards as the documents governing the teacher’s instruction. After realizing that the teacher did not write lesson plans for instruction, I provided him with a composition notebook and asked that he record any thoughts about the unit as the study progressed. Mr. Schaffer wrote two pages in the notebook which I collected and refer to as his “reflective journal.” Derived from place-based projects referenced in the literature, I created a framework for analyzing documents to determine what role, if any, place plays in the document.

In keeping with the recursive process of interpretivism, I used analytic induction (Erickson, 1986) to render an interpretation about a phenomenon, in this case how a teacher used place-based instruction in a rural English classroom and how his students perceived that instruction. Field notes, quotes, and documents provide supporting evidence. The triangulated methods, along with member checking, contribute to the study’s trustworthiness.

### Findings

While the learning experience was not a scripted intervention, it was engineered to the degree of ensuring that there would be an opportunity to observe place activities during the investigation. To that end, Mr. Schaffer tabled his original plans and agreed to teach George Ella Lyon’s poem, “Where I’m From.” I suggested this particular poem because of its rural nature. The poet is a rural Kentucky native, and I felt her poem would be relevant to students in Blue Valley. Furthermore, the poem lends itself to a conversation about place when students are asked, “Where are you from?” I also suggested other texts, such as Alan Jackson’s song “Where I Come From,” which the teacher distributed to students during day two of the experience.

### The Teacher’s Experience

When considering place in making instructional

choices for English students in a rural high school, Mr. Schaffer reflected on the importance of place in his own life. A lifelong resident of Blue Valley and an alumnus of BVHS, Mr. Schaffer believes that his conception of place and that of his students are similar. These shared concepts of place, according to Mr. Schaffer, are defined by the features of the community in which they live—the rural landscape (e.g., the mountains and farmland), the cultural norms (e.g., hunting and fishing), and the importance of family (e.g., connection to extended family).

According to Hutchinson (2004), our “sense” of place could be the many “spaces” (e.g., childhood neighborhood, college town, first adult home) with which we identify. However, for Mr. Schaffer, the space with which he identifies is categorically Blue Valley. That space begins with a literal one: his grandparents’ farmhouse in which he now lives. It is at the core of how he perceives his place, starting in an old black chair and going outward from there through what he called a “beautiful old 1830s brick farmhouse filled with antiques...through my garden and out through my buildings and my fields and then to my neighbors, all the people I’ve known since I was growing up.”

As a child, he lived with his parents and two sisters, but grew up “pretty much on [his grandparents’] farm, follow[ing] my Dad and Granddad around, learning from them.” His father and grandfather were farmers, and he credits them for teaching him the valuable life lessons of farming, hunting, and fishing: “Had it not been for my Dad and Granddad, I wouldn’t be who I am...they helped to shape me.” To his mother, he credits his love of language. She was an English teacher and would bring home old English textbooks for him to read. He described his upbringing as a “normal childhood” — spending time with family, working on the farm, and going to church regularly. Although he admitted to doing his share of “running around” in high school, he was a strong student academically and, upon graduating, attended a private college in the south where he received his teaching certificate.

Mr. Schaffer does not feel that his college degree sets him apart from others in the community: “I can still walk into Walmart with all my camo stuff on. No, I hunt, and I fish. I’m a product of the county.” This identification with the larger community has been a resource in his teaching position. He said that he can typically diffuse an “antagonistic” interaction during a parent-teacher conference by calling on common interests: “Telling a guy what he needs to do with his mower or talking about the best places to dove hunt—I try to find the common ground.” Teachers without this “common ground,” he believes, are at a disadvantage. His ability to code-switch is another advantage. “I can lapse. I can do the bad grammar, the dialectic [sic] — it all comes out. And when I’m in front of a class, you don’t get any of that.” These comments reveal his belief that community member perceptions are not based on his formal education but, rather, on his ability to embody

the local culture – hunting, fishing, relating to others.

Mr. Schaffer is a self-described “educated redneck,” a title first given to him by his wife. He explained that it was “one of the things that first really attracted her to me...that I can fix the guy next door’s tractor if it breaks down *and* order in a French restaurant – in French – for her and explain to her what it is. She says I dress up well.” Living a half mile away from his childhood home, he regularly walks up to his mother’s house, mows her yard, and still eats several meals each week in her kitchen. His sister and brother-in-law also live on the farm in their own house, and the two families share a driveway. They also watch each other’s children and exchange food. This is how he defines his sense of place: his family (wife, mother and sister), his home (family farmhouse), and the lessons he learned there (farming). He said repeatedly in a slow and proud tenor, “This is who I am.”

In describing Blue Valley, he called the area “very scenic” and “predominantly rural,” beginning with a light-hearted description of chicken houses: “Long, shiny, low buildings—they’re filled with more chickens than you could ever imagine being in one place. We do have a lot of poultry houses in the county, and there may be a little bit of odor...Chickens poop, and you have to do something with it.” As for the people, he called the locals “stereotypical Southern,” and included the positive and negative connotations that accompany that expression:

They’re friendly; they wave. You can tell if someone’s not from around here because they won’t wave. We do have a large population of, I guess, the Southern redneck with their “the South might’ve surrendered, but I didn’t” bumper stickers. And they live in trailers with their 50 or 60 thousand dollar dooly trucks, and, you know, you wonder about priorities. But you’re going to find that in a lot of places.

Mr. Schaffer continued with descriptions of the people he knows—neighbors, family members, and friends who are readily available to lend help when it is needed. He explained that he does the same—that when he comes home to occasionally find his dump truck missing, he does not call the police. Rather, he just waits for whoever borrowed it to return it.

These elements define Mr. Schaffer’s sense of place and, while that sense of place largely includes descriptions of his family and the rural landscape, they also speak to a certain quality of life in Blue Valley. For example, with regard to the recent economic recession, he explained that his sense of place means that he does not worry about the “bottom dropping out”:

I can kill things and eat them. I can just go buy a few calves and raise them and a few hogs. And I can grow all my own vegetables. Like if you’re just talking about survival, well, that’s not a concern at all. Not only would I be okay, but I’d be able to take care of a whole lot of other people as well, and extended family.

This illustrates Mr. Schaffer’s perception that his place affords him a sense of security: that the land he loves would “provide” for him in a crisis. To illustrate his point, he identified “Country Boy Can Survive” by Hank Williams, Jr. as his “theme song” and recited these lines: “I got a shotgun rifle and a 4-wheel drive / And a country boy can survive.” Despite the fact that Blue Valley has experienced a significant rise in the unemployment rate and other effects of the failing economy, Mr. Schaffer held that Blue Valley residents still have “a better quality of life here” compared to other places. Although he offered many descriptors, he most commonly referred to Blue Valley simply as *home*: “This is home. It has always been home, and it always will be. I love the mountains and the rivers, the creeks, the wide-open spaces. And I love the little towns. I love the closeness of the community.”

### **The Teacher’s Use of Place to Activate Students’ Prior Knowledge**

Mr. Schaffer believes that he and his students have a shared “sense of place,” that it is the one thing they all have in common. This fact connects him with his students and allows him to weave anecdotal place stories throughout his instruction. Mr. Schaffer described his ability to make place references as an advantage in the classroom and added, “I couldn’t do ‘this thing’ in a suburban or urban classroom. This is what I know.” Mr. Schaffer argued that this ability is an essential part of teaching his students, who often lack real world experiences. He believes that he and his students are products of their local environment, and that his sense of place cannot be extricated from any other facet of his being—including the classroom.

Mr. Schaffer not only referenced the local community but frequently shared anecdotes about community members, local hangouts, and pastimes with his students, as they related to classroom activities. He explained to me that these reference points activate prior knowledge and serve as hooks for students as they encounter less familiar curricular texts. He refers to this as a “logical” way to teach and has found that using place is a way of making the strategy of activating prior knowledge relevant for students:

If I make a chicken house reference, they’re going to get a chicken house reference because every one of us – and I don’t care where you live – has a chicken house [nearby]—you can’t get two miles from a chicken house in this county...so if I make that reference, that’s their prior knowledge.

Similarly, Mr. Schaffer used country song lyrics as place texts because “where we live every kid has at least heard these country songs. Even if they don’t listen to country music, they have a dad or a granddad or an uncle or somebody that cranks it up and listens to it on a regular basis.” In addition to increasing content relevance, he feels that this practice also addresses diversity in the classroom:

You’re going to have kids who don’t listen to a

particular kind of music. You're going to have kids who don't read anything in the newspapers, who don't watch the news. You're going to have kids who don't eat certain foods. They're so different, but if there's one thing in common – the very fact that they are attending a particular school – means that they live somewhere within probably a five to ten mile radius of that school. And, as such, they have things in common with each other. The *place* may be the thing that they have in common.

During my observations, it became apparent that the students had recently completed *The Yearling* by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and were reviewing for the test (before and after the learning experience). During one review, Mr. Schaffer reminded them that their grandparents were similar to the novel's characters by having done many of the same activities: hunting, fishing, and butchering. When I later asked Elizabeth, a student, about Mr. Schaffer's use of local reference points, she said they influenced her understanding of the novel: "Like with *The Yearling*, when you don't understand something, he'll put it in Blue Valley terms." Elizabeth's response further supported observational data demonstrating how Mr. Schaffer forged connections between Blue Valley and curricular texts. To further assess students' understanding, the essay question for the test asked for this student response: Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings was a regional writer who used descriptive language to describe the seasons, crops, animals, and people in her novel. Pretend you are a regional writer from Blue Valley. What details would you include in describing this place?

Some students were able to use these reference points as hooks in other contexts. For example, one morning during class, Mr. Schaffer shared his feelings about the economy with his students, explaining that he and his family would survive despite any devastating economic collapse. Later, I asked Nicole if she shared that belief, that she and her family would be "okay" should the economy worsen. She responded, "Like in *The Yearling* book, how instead of paying each other back in money, they did it with crops and stuff. We do that here. You notice it; like, we'll give each other tomatoes and mushrooms and stuff." She told me that when her mom, who owns a local restaurant, receives a bag of tomatoes, "she'll give [that person] a free meal" in exchange. In reflecting on Mr. Schaffer's classroom, Nicole said that he often talks about Blue Valley during class and that it helps her "because I can just relate it to stuff – because people he knows, I know, because everybody knows each other in Blue Valley." She explained that his use of connecting texts to local people and places influenced her comprehension: "That definitely helps because some things – it's like the way some people write – it's like difficult to comprehend at first, but when he relates it to something, you're like, 'oh, yeah.'" Because Mr. Schaffer laid the groundwork for

making those Blue Valley connections, Nicole was also able to make those connections as they related to her life.

Mr. Schaffer uses place to make curricular reference points for his students partly because it helps them activate prior knowledge, but also because place is an integral part of his self-concept. He is proud of his place, and tells students that they, too, should be proud of where they're from: "I always tell them: Be proud of who and what you are." Mr. Schaffer's strong sense of place and active reflections on its meaning in his life drive him to use place as curricular reference points for his students by drawing connections to the rural context in which they learn.

### **The Student Experience**

This section identifies a consequence of the teacher's use of place to mediate instruction: students were provided with a process in which they could construct their own understandings of place. The learning experience was anchored in Lyon's poem, "Where I'm From." During the study, students were given four assignments: 1) to write an initial response paper on place; 2) to respond to questions related to country song lyrics; 3) to create a "place poem," and; 4) to reflect on their experiences based on three questions. Students developed understandings of place throughout these activities, evidenced through observational data, student interviews, and student documents. Discussion of student understandings of place is organized around these four writing assignments.

In developing a place-based learning experience, the teacher and I worked together to identify texts that might evoke students' own "sense of place." In addition to Lyon's poem, we identified country song lyrics as a scaffolding activity. Our goal was to provide students with examples of place texts that could be used as models when they began writing their own place pieces.

To introduce the experience, the teacher drew on *The Yearling*. Mr. Schaffer discussed how "Baxter's Island," Penny Baxter's home in the Florida scrub, was a testimony to the protagonist's sense of place. After reading an excerpt, he offered a testimony of his own sense of place, telling students: "Living here shapes and determines who and what you are." After this introduction, Mr. Schaffer instructed students to write about their place. For this first assignment, 14 of the 19 students present turned in their initial place responses. All but two students wrote about the rural setting of their homes. For example, one student wrote: "My farm makes me me because it taught me responsibility, trust, and how to be independent. All my life I have been on a farm." This writing activity afforded students the opportunity to begin conceptualizing their personal sense of place.

During a subsequent activity, Mr. Schaffer introduced the primary place text, "Where I'm From," and led a discussion of the poem, drawing attention to the people ("Imogene and Alafair"), the local landmarks ("Artemus

and Billie's Branch"), specifics about the speaker's place ("fried corn and strong coffee"), and the history ("old pictures") made evident in the poem's details. He told students that they would have the remainder of class (approximately 20 minutes) and the following class period to write their own place poems. Mr. Schaffer instructed them to be as creative as they liked, or to use Lyon's poem as a model if they were struggling. The model text provided the only supporting instruction for the assignment.

The activity provided students with an opportunity to construct their understandings of place. The following excerpt from Susan's poem is a strong example of a student incorporating descriptive details of place:

I am from the chicken houses  
From the sounds of chirp, chirp, peep, peep  
I am from the smell of chicken crap  
I am from the basketball coach  
Who smells of chicken poo  
And can't tie a tie to save his life

This particular example reflects the kind of local references to which Mr. Schaffer earlier alluded. Laura also used descriptive details and included cultural features of place, such as church and community support, as characterized by this excerpt:

I am from Blue Valley...  
I am from the beautiful mountains...  
I am from the banks of the great Slocum River,  
where the water mysteriously flows northward...  
where church is important and a porch swing  
attracts a gathering.  
I am from a valley where all understand the  
language of music,  
the sounds of worshipers, and the songs of fund-  
raisers.

To investigate the influence of Mr. Schaffer's personal feelings about Blue Valley on his students, I purposely sought disconfirming evidence, challenging students' positive portrayals of place. However, even in one-on-one interviews, the five students interviewed maintained their positive attitudes about Blue Valley.

Initially, Mr. Schaffer used place as an "unintentional" underpinning to the mandated curriculum. He provided his own place anecdotes to create reference points for students. He relied on these place reference points in order to help students activate prior knowledge for the texts that followed.

The place-based learning activities, however, shifted the use of place from the "unintentional" to the explicit focus of instruction and granted students an authorial voice, thus giving them license to create their own concepts of place.

### **Cultural Norms Identified Throughout the Learning Experience**

Three salient themes regarding cultural norms were consistently observed during place-based instruction: family, faith, and localism. When discussing his personal "sense of place," Mr. Schaffer often reflected on the importance of his family. He spoke deferentially of his parents and grandparents and the lessons they taught him. His notion of "family" included his extended family and community members. When the place-based instruction commenced, Mr. Schaffer spoke of his family often, especially his father and grandfather. When students were asked to write about their sense of place, they, too, reflected on the importance of family. For example, one student alluded to the strength and steadfast nature of his family: "They keep me going and teach me about life." Teacher and student responses to the place-based content clearly afforded students the opportunity to reflect on their families and the role they play in their conceptualization of place.

The second salient theme related to cultural norms was faith. In Mr. Schaffer's description of his childhood, he described going to church every Sunday as part of a "normal childhood," indicating it as a common or expected activity in Blue Valley. This point was reinforced when students were introduced to the various place texts. The content of Lyon's poem and several of the country songs point to the common experience of faith in the context of being from a rural area. In fact, during the discussion of a song lyric, Mr. Schaffer asked, "I'm serious. How many of you go to church on a regular basis?" About half the students raised their hands. Mr. Schaffer said, "Good, good. I'm happy to see that." (He did not acknowledge the students who did not raise their hands.) One student, Nicole, observed: "There are a lot of churches here." The teacher agreed, and Nicole added, "Pastors are like family." Again, Mr. Schaffer affirmed her observation, adding, "That's right. We don't have social workers or psychiatrists around here. We have preachers." This exchange illustrates the opportunity that place-based instruction offered students to identify and discuss the importance of faith in Blue Valley.

The third category of cultural norms, localism, includes the identification and discussion of the activities and behaviors that represent what it means to be local to Blue Valley, specifically in the context of understanding gender roles and community connectedness.

Cultural norms related to gender roles were observed in Mr. Schaffer's interactions with his students. During these observations, it became apparent that boys and girls both were expected to engage in the rural activities of Blue Valley.

Discussions about the importance of hunting and fishing, owning a gun, and driving a truck were commonplace in Mr. Schaffer's classroom, identifying these particular activities as ones in which local men engaged. However, many of the female students discussed and wrote about hunting and fishing with their fathers or working their farms, indicating that they, too, participated in these local practices.

These cultural norms influence the context of the English classroom, as indicated in Mr. Schaffer's reflective journal, in which he wrote: "Today went well – write the poem day – trying to convince them that poetry is—(1) not gay (2) sort of cool (3) something they can all do—is difficult." The fact that he recognized that poetry may be negatively perceived by students (as indicated with his use of "gay" as a pejorative term) demonstrates the presence of specific gender-related cultural norms operating in the classroom. To counter this potential perception, when Mr. Schaffer introduced "Where I'm From," he said: "I love poetry. I truly, truly do. I have books of poetry on the back of my commode." While in this example Mr. Schaffer seemed to be concerned with student perceptions, I also observed his use of the word "gay" as a way to joke with students or belittle something. For example, he referred to soccer as "gay," indicating that "real men" play football.

In discussing the song lyrics for "Country Boy," students were asked what makes someone a "country boy" or "country girl" in Blue Valley. Of 20 responses, eight students said "working on a farm," seven wrote about a particular activity (e.g., being outside, hunting, or riding a 4-wheeler or tractor), and six responded "having a gun." These responses push against mainstream gender norms for country "girls" but, nonetheless, identify what is expected of boys and girls in Blue Valley. These songs and the ensuing conversations about them affirmed students' understandings of gender roles in Blue Valley. These examples are significant as they point to cultural values regarding gender roles evident in the region.

In conversations about place, participants identified community connectedness as a feature of localism. Community connectedness was expressed as a cultural norm with regard to the way locals were expected to act toward one another. Another example of community connectedness was observed during the frequent talk of the current economic crisis and the expectation that locals provide for their families and neighbors. Place in the English curriculum evoked participants' identification and discussion of the cultural norms of family, faith, and localism, observed in conversations and student writing. However, Mr. Schaffer did not probe students to examine these cultural norms and, therefore, instruction stopped short of critically understanding their implications.

### Discussion

This study's findings illustrate one "entry point" into

an English curriculum undergirded by place. While Mr. Schaffer considered the use of place an effective strategy in the classroom, he did not challenge his students to think critically about the complexities of place. Without this critical step, the place-based discussions and writing of his students remained unexamined. His own biases functioned as blinders to opportunities for cultivating greater awareness; therefore, the resulting critique considers the critical components of place-based learning in the context of this investigation and provides the reader with a more multifaceted picture of the teacher and his classroom, one that reflects a balance to the teacher's often romanticized view of life in Blue Valley.

Findings suggest that relevance is a key component in a place-based curriculum and perhaps even more so in the rural classroom (Hardré & Reeve, 2003; Hardré, Sullivan, & Roberts, 2008). Findings also illuminate how "place" in an English curriculum can affirm the value of a community by providing a forum for students to identify and discuss its cultural norms. Implications from these findings suggest that place in the English curriculum may increase curricular relevance for rural students and the occasion for their teachers to promote critical literacy skills, as well as complicate their thinking about its meaning. Place content allowed students to articulate their own understandings of place and its meaning in their lives. Place *content* can be a context within which students identify the features of place, as well as an opportunity to problematize the use of place by challenging local assumptions and biases.

This study identifies the possibility of a place-based curriculum to promote relevance, particularly for rural students who may feel a "disconnect" from the mandated curriculum. Mr. Schaffer used his personal sense of place to forge connections between home and school for his students. He also used content to mediate place and, in the process, students constructed their own understandings of place. This led Mr. Schaffer and his students to identify and discuss Blue Valley's cultural norms. I realized, as the study progressed, that Mr. Schaffer's particular views of rural life and his personal biases functioned as a "hidden" curriculum. As the literature in rural education illustrates, rural life is multifaceted and often fraught with poverty and limited access to educational equity. Mr. Schaffer briefly acknowledged local financial issues (e.g., the school's pay freeze and the county's unemployment rate) and certain disconcerting aspects of his rural community (e.g., Slocum's decline and local "rednecks"); however, he primarily emphasized the benefits of a close-knit community and did not invite students to critically examine the characteristics of their rural community.

For example, students' initial place responses were largely descriptive with many students reflecting on what they appreciated and valued about their immediate sense of place. This can be seen as a natural response of students



challenged with writing about place for the first time. However, students had no opportunity to further develop those responses. Consequently, their responses fell short of the example Mr. Schaffer provided from *The Yearling*, in which the author offered a complicated view of a rural setting – one that balanced the benefits (e.g., “friendliness”) with the drawbacks (e.g., “bickering” and “suspicion”). Mr. Schaffer admitted that he did not consider himself a strong writing instructor and, as a result, his students’ writings on place remained first drafts, limited in the ways most initial drafts are.

Mr. Schaffer’s personal understanding of place and his expression of bias served as a metaphor for place, and, consequently, his students produced work that affirmed – rather than examined – place. Using a critical lens could challenge students to confront the complicated features of place with the aim of developing a more nuanced understanding of it and, in the process, provide teachers with a means for monitoring their own biases.

For example, students in Mr. Schaffer’s classroom had the opportunity to think about community membership through their reading of country song lyrics and Lyon’s poem, and through the writing of their own place poems during the learning experience. Framed by Mr. Schaffer’s genuine affection for life in Blue Valley, the majority of his students reflected positively on their own understanding of place. In fact, the affirming mood of the discussions on place may have implicitly discouraged students from offering contrary expressions. A critical lens would have offered these students not only the opportunity to identify the positive features of living in Blue Valley but also to challenge the limiting characteristics of life in a rural community.

Mr. Schaffer and his students identified family, faith, and localism as characteristics of life in Blue Valley. However, instruction was not extended to include a forum for discussing the advantages and disadvantages of living in a rural area defined by these characteristics. An aspect of Blue Valley localism, for example, was gender roles and gender expectations. An example of this uncontested bias for traditionally prescribed behaviors was Mr. Schaffer’s use of the word “gay,” first observed in his reflective journal to express his concern about students’ possible perceptions of the poem used in class. This comment indicated that reading and writing poetry might be perceived as an activity that defies localism in Blue Valley and that the community might not be a supportive one for those expressing differences. Later, I observed Mr. Schaffer’s personal use of the word “gay” to speak negatively of activities. In the first instance, I found Mr. Schaffer’s comment to be a reflective one (albeit in a politically incorrect context); my later observations of his use of the word spoke more to a lack of his own critical awareness. Using the word “gay” to refer to something or someone as not “cool” may be a commonplace, derogatory slang; nonetheless, it is a powerfully biased

comment when used by a trusted teacher in the company of students. Other gender expectations, such as hunting and fishing, were expressed by both the teacher and students throughout the investigation. However, students were not given the opportunity to challenge these expectations or to think critically about the cultural biases they perpetuated.

A teacher wishing to inspire more critical examinations of such norms could use the standard curriculum to have the “tough” conversations that Mr. Schaffer and his students did not. For example, a cultural norm identified throughout the learning experience was faith and, on more than one occasion, Mr. Schaffer expressed his personal bias for Christian values and for attending church. Faith is also a major theme in many works taught in high school, both canonical and non-canonical, Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* being a canonical example. An important theme in Lee’s novel, faith is situated in a small, rural, southern, and Christian community fraught with racial and social tensions. As such, faith is a lens available to teachers and their students for evaluating character motivation. In this case, students could investigate the influence of faith in the novel and connect that understanding to their own community.

There were other “missed opportunities” to consider place critically in Mr. Schaffer’s classroom. For example, he told his students, “We’re all products of our environment.” However, students were not asked *how* or *why* this occurs or given the opportunity to challenge this assertion. Using place to encourage civic involvement could allow students to see the reciprocal nature of one’s relationship to “place.” To achieve this, students in Blue Valley might have interviewed local residents to understand resources afforded to others. They could have investigated how education served their parents or grandparents. In doing so, students would be encouraged to address any limitations of living in their particular community so that, if they chose, they might be empowered to change those limiting aspects of the community or to become more resourceful in the face of such obstacles.

Mr. Schaffer’s place-based pedagogy did not incorporate practices that promote *critical* literacy skills, though there were opportunities to do so. For example, in response to Gentry’s “My Town” lyrics, several students talked about changes to their local community: new schools, increase of fires, two new fast food chains in the Wal-Mart shopping center, and the new recycling plant. These responses identify social and economic changes in Blue Valley whose examination could extend students’ conceptual development of “place.” For example, the teacher could connect fires to global warming, Wal-Mart to urbanization, and recycling to “green” initiatives.

The purpose of such inquiry would be to empower students with critical literacy skills for understanding the relationship between rural communities and larger issues that seem otherwise remote. In other words, place in the English

curriculum could offer students not only the opportunity to construct their own understandings of place and its meaning in their lives but, if expanded, the conditions for cultivating an evaluative stance toward place and the world *beyond* it. A critical pedagogy of place could potentially allow students to view place – its norms, limits, and possibilities – as a reciprocal and malleable concept they can affect.

### **Conclusion**

Persistent poverty, geographic isolation, and cultural factors complicate educational issues in rural schools. Despite these challenges, rural students have performed well on achievement measures; still, rural students are less likely to complete high school or attend college. Rural areas typically have little to offer residents by way of post-secondary education or employment, resulting in an outmigration that may contribute to a continuing mistrust of formal education. This puts an even greater burden on schools and teachers to promote a culture of learning that honors the specific local context of rural areas. This study suggests that allowing students to explore their personal sense of place is an effective first step of using place in the English classroom. By understanding how students think about and value their “place,” teachers will be better equipped to make use of local reference points to activate students’ prior knowledge and to forge relevant connections to the curriculum. These practices, however, can be limiting without a critical frame.

Paulo Freire challenged the job of the English teacher when he asserted that literacy is political. He delineated literacy instruction as either oppressive or emancipatory and suggested that literacy instruction designed to liberate students must teach them the dual acts of reading the “word” and the “world.” In doing so, he introduced English teachers to the conversation provoked by critical theorists who argued that *all* education is political.

Proponents of place-based education often cite Freire when advocating for place-conscious pedagogy (Budge, 2006; Edmondson, 2003; Gruenewald, 2003; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008), believing that place in English instruction can empower students to gain critical literacy skills that transcend classroom needs. This study indicates that, even in a brief experience of place-based instruction, this notion of literacy has the potential to deepen student understanding of place and its importance in their lives. If researchers continue to investigate the extent to which place can be a relevant vehicle for promoting “critical” literacy in the way Freire envisioned, then rural teachers and their students will have the means to transform education in a way that more fully actualizes the possibility of place.

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