

Sweet Home Wisconsin: Discovering Rural Diversity through Literacy

Katie M McCabe, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Abstract: McCabe advises educators to provide rural school students with a reading and writing curriculum highlighting rural diversity and dissolving rural stereotypes in order to increase inclusivity in their communities.

If you are an educator in a rural school, you might relate to some of the following experiences rural educators have shared with me:

1. Receiving a dozen chicken eggs on your desk from a student.
2. Knowing school attendance will be poor or even cancelled on opening day of hunting season.
3. Having a part-time job at the creamery on the weekends and taking half-gallons of local milk to share with your students during class.
4. Showing YouTube videos of subway systems so your students can relate to a math word problem.

While these scenarios may ring true to some rural teachers, beliefs about teaching and living in rural places often translate into rural stereotypes created by larger society and perpetuated even in the rural classroom. If you Google “rural stereotypes,” you will discover that Wikipedia provides 15 pages of “Stereotypes of Rural People” illustrating the multitude created across the United States (e.g., hillbilly, redneck, boondocks, okie, swamp Yankee, white trash). These images, which have flooded predominant understandings of rural culture, have suggested deficiency in rural people and a need to fix rurality (Donehower, 2007). Literacy instruction can serve as a powerful vehicle for

disrupting such static understandings and introducing more complex understandings of rurality.

Literacy instruction seldom creates a reading and writing curriculum which allows students in rural communities to see the complexity and diversity of their daily lives reflected in the curriculum. Instead, notions of rurality rely on media caricatures that further essentialize beliefs about rural places. Too often the stereotypical dialogue of rural people has belittled complicated political and social problems to just “personality traits and cultural quirks” (Eller, 1999, p. x). Rather than allowing our students to believe in these stereotypes and develop their own identity within the greater public notion, educators can work to empower students through literature which re-imagines rural literacies (Donehower, 2007).

Now, more than ever, with geographic divides also shaping political and social climates, centering rurality as a form of cultural diversity can contribute to more equitable and inclusive literacy classrooms. While most people think about inclusive education as it relates to disability, in this paper I highlight an under-examined aspect of inclusive education by surfacing rural literacies as an equity tool for the literacy classroom. This paper aims to advance a place-conscious literacy pedagogy that illuminates the complexity and diversity of rural life. Indeed, place consciousness coupled with utilizing students’ funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2006) contributes to a robust and equitable literacy curriculum for students in rural and non-rural classrooms alike to move from understanding rurality through caricatures to complexity.

Using Place-Conscious Theories to Create Inclusive Literacy Curriculum in Rural Schools

Place-conscious education could echo and contribute ideals to a Culturally Relevant Pedagogy framework (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Earlier research has focused on strategies to increase cultural responsive teaching in urban settings (Alim, 2011; Emdin, 2016), yet similar theories can be applied to rural places. Place can provide a powerful vehicle of change in creating inclusive and culturally relevant literacy curricula. Historically, the focus of curricular research has been centered on the context of urban schools, often

leaving out the specific focus of rural schools (Ortlieb & Cheek, 2008). The recent presidential election has created an urgency in a greater understanding of what rural means and what counts as rural. While often geographically distanced from large metropolitan areas, rural schools may experience inequities similar to their urban counterparts (e.g., teacher shortages, access to resources, and poverty). Research conducted specific to urban schools, however, cannot be generalized to address rural schools' needs.

In the state of Wisconsin, approximately 44% of public school students attend schools in rural communities ("Advancing Rural Wisconsin," 2016). Out of the 424 districts in the state, 328 (77%) are classified as "rural" or "town." Wisconsin public schools in rural locations face declining enrollment, increased per-pupil costs, and higher numbers of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch (Kemp, 2016). These statistics, along with the state's Advancing Rural Wisconsin Initiative, urge the need for rural-specific research and practice to create more equitable opportunities.

Theories of place attend to how people form identities and outcomes based on the space they occupy (Gruenewald, 2003), as the shared experiences and memories in shared places develop individual identities. In rural education contexts, place-based education allows for more culturally relevant curricula. Place then becomes an artifact of human culture, and integrating those ideals into curriculum in rural schools offers a more equitable way for students to express their culture and consider their rural identities in relation to the world outside of their rural community (Gruenewald, 2003).

Putting Place-Conscious Theories into Literacy Practice

Research offers suggestions for putting place-conscious theory into curricular practice. For example, teachers and researchers in Tucson, Arizona, collaborated to understand students' funds of knowledge by discovering families' strengths, interests, and backgrounds to create a curriculum based on the local cultural knowledges (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2006). Teachers can use their knowledge and responsibility to the community in order to engage the students in literacy that builds on the practices of their

homes (Waller & Barrentine, 2015). Drawing from various place-conscious theories of practice, I present three literacy strategies teachers can experiment with, build on, or personalize to give their students opportunities to explore rurality through their curriculum: selective use of rural texts, building critical consciousness, and developing student identities.

Selective use of rural texts. Carefully chosen texts depicting rural life and contexts can be used in the classroom to replace stereotypical portrayals of rurality to attend to rural students' developing understanding. Providing these texts and teaching them through a critical lens allow rural students to have a "mirror" and a representation of contemporary rural life (Behrens & Petrone, 2017). Carefully selected texts set in rural areas allow students to engage with and develop their views of themselves and others. Both images and words facilitate the creation of identities, allowing students to understand their position in relation to the rest of the world. Texts set in rural areas might be previewed to consider whether they highlight people as self-reliant, as having strong community ties, and as depicting the overall enjoyment of living in a rural area (Epply, 2010).

Prescribed literacy curriculum may center racial and ethnic diversity, yet other types of diversity are often eclipsed or ignored, such as geographic differences, i.e., rurality. This might necessitate supplementing prescribed curricula to reflect geographical diversity. Further, industry-created curricula may not accurately represent rural schools in the complex ways that will allow learners to develop deep understandings of themselves or others. Teachers' willingness or opportunity to move beyond the prescribed curriculum will better ensure access to carefully selected depictions of rurality as a form of diversity. Rural areas are represented through various genres of writing. For instance, through a blend of poetry and verse, Creech's (2016) *Moo* tells the story of a young girl who moves from a big city to rural Maine, and Smiley's (1991) *A Thousand Acres* is Shakespeare's *King Lear* reimaged through a new setting on a wealthy farm in Iowa.

When choosing picture books for younger students, teachers will want to choose those that allow students to relate to rural life through the story and pictures. Epply's (2010) review of children's literature found that few books characterized rural areas with

“respectful authenticity” (p. 7). Books do not always have to authentically represent contemporary rural America, as long as the misrepresentations are pointed out and discussed as teaching moments. Teachers can use books as tools of “political participation” by allowing students to critically ponder over and converse about the stereotypical assumptions of where they live. When planning lessons, teachers can use mentor texts that allow students to draw from their rural funds of knowledge in order to write about connections to their own lives (Newman, 2012). From the combined work of Waller and Barrentine (2015), Epply (2010), and Behrens and Petrone (2017), I provide a combined list (see Tables 1 and 2) of books that represent rural places in ways that support working with students to develop more complex understandings and representations of rural places.

Table 1. *Examples of Place-conscious Rural Literature*

Picture Books

Aardema, V. (1981). *Bringing the rain to Kapiti Plain*. New York, NY: E.P. Dutton.

Andrews, J. (2007). *The auction*. Toronto: Groundwood Books.

Blos, J. (1987). *Old Henry*. New York: William Morrow

Borton, L. (1997). *Junk pile!* New York: Philomel.

Altman, L. J. (1993). *Amelia’s road*. New York, NY: Lee & Low Books.

Bouchard, D. (1998). *If you’re not from the prairie*. New York, NY: Aladdin Books.

Cuyler, M. (1999). *From here to there*. New York, NY: Henry Holt.

Friedrich, E. (1996). *Leah’s pony*. Honesdale, PA: Boyd Mills Press.

Guthrie, W. (1998). *This land is your land*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

Haas, J. (2000). *Hurry!* New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Henkes, K. (2005). *So happy!* New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Hundal, N. (1999). *Prairie summer*. Toronto, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside.

Johnson, A. (2000). *Down the winding road*. New York: Dorling Kindersley.

MacLachlan, P. (1994). *All the places to love*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

Moore, Y. & Bannatyne-Cugnet, J. (1992). *A prairie alphabet*. Toronto: Tundra Books.

Pochocki, E. (1989). *Rosebud and red flannel*. New York, NY: Henry Holt.

Rylant, C. (1985). *The relatives came*. New York, NY: Bradbury Press

Schertle, A. (1995). *Down the road*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace.

Schubert, L. (2005). *Here comes Darrell*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Seymour, T. (2005). *Auction!* Cambridge: Candlewick Press.

Siebert, D. (1989). *Heartland*. New York, NY: Thomas Y. Crowell.

Thompson, C. (1992). *The paper bag prince*. New York: Knopf.

Wyeth, S. (2002). *Something beautiful*. New York: Dragonfly Books.

Yolen, J. (1995). *Letting swift river go*. New York: Philomel Books.

Yolen, J. (1987). *Owl moon*. New York, NY: Putnam Publishing Group.

Chapter Books

Bauer, J. (2000). *Hope was here*. G.P. Putnam's Sons.

Danforth, E. (2012). *The miseducation of Cameron Post*. Blazer & Bray.

Gardiner, J. R. (1980). *Stone fox*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Lord, C. (2012). *Touch blue*. New York: Scholastic, Inc.

Harmon, M. (2008). *Last exit to normal*. Knopf Books.

Mosher, J. (2002). *The Last Buffalo Hunter*. David R. Godline.

Murdock, C. G. (2007). *Dairy queen*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Murphy, J. (2015). *Dumplin'*. Blazer & Bray.

Paterson, K. (1977). *Bridge to Terabithia*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Peck, R. (1998). *A long way from Chicago*. New York: Penguin Putnam.

Peck, R. (2000). *A year down yonder*. New York, NY: Penguin Putnam.

Peters, J. A. (2008). *Far from Xanadu*. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.

Reynolds, P. N. (1991). *Shiloh*. New York, NY: Dell.

Tharp, T. (2008). *Knights of Hill Country*. New York: Laurel Leaf.

Weaver, W. (1995). *Farm team*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Whitaker, A. (2012). *The queen of Kentucky*. Poppy.

White, E. B. (1952). *Charlottes' web*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.

Williams, S. (2009). *Bull Rider*. Margaret K. McElderry Books.

Zenther, J. (2016). *The serpent king*. Crown.

Table 2. *Examples of Visual Representations of Rurality in Children's Books (Click on the picture to access the Amazon page of each title)*



Building critical consciousness. The section above discussed incorporating this into the classroom through texts representing rural areas with varying perspectives, but the conversations connected to those texts are opportunities to develop critical consciousness. Effective place-conscious curricula includes engaging students in critical conversations that allow them to better understand the world outside their own (Azano, 2011).

Critical consciousness refers to Freire's (1970) seminal pedagogy that focused on the process of liberation through attention to power. While critical consciousness is often connected to racial and ethnic diversity, it is a concept that can also advance place-conscious curricula focusing on barriers faced by those living in rural contexts. Critical conversations give rural youth in these areas more power, autonomy, and agency in understanding and shaping their individual futures. Rural educators can reach for the goal of helping students to engage in depth (of their rural lives) and breadth (of the greater world around them). What is "critical is that rural students learn to read the word and the world" (Azano, 2015, p. 269).

In a study of a rural high school English class, Azano found that teachers in rural areas who use place in their classrooms often "miss opportunities" when using curriculum without a critical lens. Critical discussions allow students to attain more post-secondary opportunities by creating independent and critical thinkers. Opportunities to increase cultural understanding allow youth to advocate for their community while also understanding communities beyond their own. While discussions are valuable opportunities for developing critical consciousness, teachers can also use lessons that incorporate place-based documentary making as a tool to advocate for their own community (Pyles, 2016) and represent their lived experiences through their own lenses.

Developing student identities. Strategies such as creating documentaries, writing opinion pieces, or developing memoirs can support literacy instruction in ways that allow youth to explore their own identities. Opportunities can be afforded to rural youth to make sense of the place in which they find themselves learning and living. Too often deficits such as "being poor" become synonymous with "being rural" (Pyles, 2016). Students need opportunities to formulate their own ideas of and identities around rurality. Pyles (2016) found other student-derived themes to explore, such as the impact of local men deployed to serve overseas, of mental illness on rural youth, and of rural people surviving on minimum wage jobs. Rural youth need opportunities to define what it means to be rural while developing their own personal individualities and expressing what they find relevant and critical in their own lives.

Reading and writing units of study can further students' conceptualizations of self in rural contexts. For example, they can center students' individual identities so they know where they fit in their community and the greater world (Ketter & Buter, 2004). Lessons can also require students to conduct research projects about historical and scientific localities in order to define their own sense of place (Hodges, 2004). Providing recourses to facilitate these developments should be the responsibility of a teacher working toward crafting an inclusive classroom. Classroom projects, similar in nature, will allow students represent themselves within their communities.

Conclusion

Overall, when creating place-conscious curriculum, teachers invest themselves within the community and the lives of their students. Creating these relationships will allow for further conversations around curricula relevant to rural youth (Young, 2004). Across rural communities it can be easy to reduce diversity to race and ethnicity, but geography, or place, is a powerful way to understand students' multidimensional identities and provide opportunities for them to acknowledge the value of themselves and their community. Using place-conscious curricula will also expand the value of diversity beyond the walls of classrooms. The literacy strategies outlined in this paper create a foundation for rural (and non-rural) educators to advance place-conscious pedagogies. Furnishing rural themed texts, building critical consciousness, and providing opportunities to develop their identities are starting points to building more inclusive classrooms in the rural context and global learners beyond the rural community.

On your next morning commute, when the dew is fresh on the farm fields and your car rolls over hills to your school, think about how you can connect all the beauty and diversity in this place and the people who are a part of it to your literacy practice. How you will acknowledge and make visible the diversity in your classroom while disrupting generalized assumptions about where you work and the students you teach? How will you teach these ideals so your students will do the same in society? A place-conscious literacy curriculum is a robust starting point.

References

Advancing rural Wisconsin to support our schools and communities. (n.d.). Retrieved September 17, 2017, from <https://dpi.wi.gov/rural>

Alim, H. S. (2011). Global ill-literacies: Hip hop cultures, youth identities, and the politics of literacy. *Review of Research in Education*, 35(1), 120-146.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X10383208>

Azano, A. (2011). The possibility of place: One teacher's use of place-based instruction for English students in a rural high school. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 26(10), 1-12. Retrieved from <http://jrre.vmhost.psu.edu>

Azano, A. (2015). Addressing the rural context in literacies research: A call to action. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 59(3), 267-269.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.480>

Behrens, A., & Petrone, R. (2017, May 31). Representations of contemporary rural people and places in YAL [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://www.yawednesday.com/blog/representations-of-contemporary-rural-people-and-places-in-yal>

Creech, S. (2016). *Moo*. New York: HarperCollins.

Donehower, K. (2007). Rhetorics and realities: The history and effects of stereotypes about rural literacies. In K. Donehower, C. Hogg, & E. E. Schell (Eds.), *Rural literacies* (pp. 37-76). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Eller, R. (1999). [Foreword]. In D. B. Billings, G. Norman, & K. Ledford (Eds.), *Confronting Appalachian stereotypes: Back talk from an American region* (pp. ix-xi). Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.

Emdin, C. (2016). *For White folks who teach in the hood ... and the rest of y'all too: Reality pedagogy and urban education*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Eppley, K. (2010). Picturing rural America: An analysis of the representation of contemporary rural America in picture books for children. *Rural Educator*, 32(1), 1-10. Retrieved from the Education Research Complete database. (Accession No. 56534999)

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. London: Bloomsbury.

González, N., Moll, L. C., & Amanti, C. (Eds.). (2006). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Gruenewald, D. A. (2003). Foundations of place: A multidisciplinary framework for place-conscious education. *American Educational Research Journal*, 40(3), 619-654. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312040003619>

Hodges, V. P. (2004). Using a sense of place to teach at-risk rural students. *English Journal*, 93(6), 27-30. Retrieved from the ERIC database. (Accession No. EJ716922)

Kemp, S. (2016, January/February). A perfect storm: Declining enrollment, increasing student poverty and rising operational costs are putting pressures on rural schools. *Wisconsin School News*, 14-17. Retrieved from <https://wasb.org/products-publications/wisconsin-school-news/>

Ketter, J., & Buter, D. (2004). Transcending spaces: Exploring identity in a rural American middle school. *English Journal*, 93(6), 47-53. Retrieved from the ERIC database. (Accession No. EJ716926)

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 465-491. Retrieved from the ERIC database. (Accession No. EJ512942)

Newman, B. M. (2012). Mentor texts and funds of knowledge: Situating writing within our students' worlds. *Voices from the Middle*, 20(1), 25-30. Retrieved from the ERIC database. (Accession No. EJ993600)

Ortlieb, E. T., & Cheek, E. H. (2008). How geographic location plays a role within instruction: Venturing into both rural and urban elementary schools. *Educational*

Research Quarterly, 32(1), 51-68. Retrieved from the ERIC database. (Accession No. EJ847438)

Pyles, D. G. (2016). Rural media literacy: Youth documentary videomaking as a rural literacy practice. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 31(7), 1-15. Retrieved from <http://jrre.vmhost.psu.edu>

Smiley, J. (1991). *A thousand acres*. New York: Random House.

Waller, R., & Barrentine, S. J. (2015). Rural elementary teachers and place-based connections to text during reading instruction. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 30(7), 1-13. Retrieved from <http://jrre.vmhost.psu.edu>

Young, C. A. (2004). Conversation as curriculum: Learning to teach English in rural America. *English Journal*, 93(6), 82-88. Retrieved from the ERIC database. (Accession No. EJ716932)