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Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to Mrs. Meier-Fisher. Without you, none of this would be possible. And to my rural students for continuing to teach me about how to be a teacher even long after you've graduated.

Reflections on Rurality in the Classroom: Connecting to Curriculum through Place

CHEA PARTON
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I grew up on an 80-acre farm, a daughter and granddaughter of farmers, and had always lived in the country. When I was in 7th grade, my (favorite) English teacher told us a story about when she first moved from a large city to our rural area. With an eerie tone to her voice, she told us that one autumn night, she saw lights moving back and forth, back and forth, outside of her window. She said that she had no idea what it could be, and it scared her to death. The only thing she could come up with was aliens, and she was so convinced it was a UFO, she called the police. You know what it was? A combine. My whole class of rural kids laughed. We thought it was about the most ridiculous thing we'd ever heard.

After getting over the discomfort of going to a university that was 50 times larger than my hometown, I returned to a rural school as an English teacher. It wasn't as easy as I thought it would be. I didn't fit in as readily as I assumed I would. And I did that thing that English teachers do in schools with limited resources—I went to the book room and picked novels that looked reasonably intact and that I enjoyed as a reader. One of those happened to be Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, which I proceeded to teach to my sophomores.

One day during their book clubs, I went over to a couple of boys who I knew likely hadn't read and probably weren't talking about what they were supposed to be. Before I could ask them what they were up to, they asked if I'd ever read *Where the Red Fern Grows*. I had but it had been a long, long time ago. They then proceeded to wax poetic about how much they loved that book, about

how much it affected them, about how they cried because it made them think of their own hunting dogs. I am both embarrassed and ashamed to say that rather than engage with them about that book and ask if there were any others that they also enjoyed reading, I (hopefully kindly) reminded them that we were reading *The Awakening* and that it'd be great if they could get back on task.

What these vignettes illustrate is the importance of place—both where we're from and where we are—to our connection to and engagement with both teaching and learning. Learning the literacies and languages and cultures of both familiar and unfamiliar places is crucial to teachers' educational practices, relationship building, and the meaning students make of both the word and the world.

My English teacher's struggle to make sense of the combine harvesting near her house mirrored her struggle to make sense of the rural lives and experiences of her students. And no matter whether I realized it at the time or not, those boys were readers, they just wanted to read something that they could see themselves in. They wanted a mirror, and for rural students, those are desperately few and far between.

Reflecting on Place and Practice: What Got in the Way?

There are multiple layers in these vignettes to how place was a hindrance to student learning, but the major ones were related to the metrocentricity (Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen) and urbanormativity (Thomas and Fulkerson) of teacher education—that is that the bulk of

scholarship is on and reflects the perspective of urban and suburban teachers and students and assumes that this is the normative/right perspective to have—and how that manifests in classroom practice.

For example, because my English teacher was from a city and unfamiliar with rural culture, we never read rural books unless they were canonical (which tend to position rurality as pathological and something to be cured or fixed anyway). At no point were we asked to critically consider our rural culture, and we were always educated to leave (Corbett). There was no question that in order to be successful you had to go to college and get out of our one-stoplight town. It also meant that my teacher's unfamiliarity with rural language practices led to a lot of correction that resulted in many of us working to unlearn our rural language variety and see it as substandard and incorrect rather than appreciating it as part of our rural identities (Parton). This resulted in a couple of hindrances to students' growth: (1) some students refused to engage with the curriculum because of their appreciation for their rural identities and lifeways or (2) some students essentially unlearned their rurality which hindered their ability to think and make meaning from that perspective.

Because my English teacher and I were taught to be teachers in the same urbanormative system, I perpetuated these issues in my own rural classroom. For example, even though my teacher education program was at a land grant institution with a huge agricultural program that served rural students and graduated teachers who went to teach in rural schools, it did not offer the opportunity to consider the important differences of teaching in a rural school and community. We didn't read a single piece of scholarship that explicitly discussed rural teaching and rural identities, nor did we discuss the different needs of rural students,

teachers, and communities. We did, however, talk a lot about urban teaching and urban identities. We read canonical and young adult literature that were mirrors for those identities. And we talked about the specific needs of folks who live and learn in those types of communities. So, I made mistakes that got in the way of my students' learning and identity development as rural people, even though I still identified as rural myself. I made assumptions about them and the value of certain types of curricula because of the dominant narratives and perspectives represented in my teacher education program. In this specific instance, my readers weren't engaged with the book I chose because:

1. I chose it.
2. It takes place in 19th century Louisiana, which was about the farthest you could get from 21st century Poneto, Indiana.
3. They couldn't see themselves in it and resented that they had to read yet another teacher-selected book about somebody other than them.

And, honestly, after finally reading some rural young adult literature, I get it. The connection I feel when I can recognize characters' rural experiences, values, culture, language and connect it to my own – it is unlike any other reading experience I've had. I feel seen and understood in a way I never had before.

Hindsight is 20/20: What I Wish I Would Have Done

I wish I would've recognized the role of place to identity construction and cultural practice. Even though I was a rural student, all of my education told me that being country, a redneck, a hillbilly, a hick, were all undesirable things to be and that I should aspire to be "more" than that. And so, that became my stance as a rural teacher. I wish I would've understood that rural is culture and

that (even the undesirable aspects) of cultures matter, because we are always reading and writing through our own culturally-shaped experiences. I wish I would've put it together that those culturally-based experiences are always connected to place, so we are always reading and writing and learning through place. I wish I would've invited students to talk about it—to dig into their identities as complex rural people and to investigate how who we understand ourselves to be (both as teachers and learners) and how we engage with curriculum is inextricably connected to place.

I wish I would have recognized and taught my rural students that rurality is a complex and nuanced culture that has its own language practices and art, and that those are valuable despite the larger societal narrative that they aren't. I wish I would've told them that their ways of speaking and being and creating aren't incorrect or improper, they're just different. I wish I would've said to them that they deserved to see their rural lives and experiences represented, honored, and recognized as more than a disease to be cured or the butt of a redneck joke in curriculum and popular culture. And I wish I could go back and change who and how I was as their teacher. But I can't go back. So, I'll just try to do

better now that I know better. Which is why I created Literacy In Place (literacyinplace.com), a website that houses an evolving list of rural YA books as well as other teaching supports for rural teachers.

For more rural book suggestions, teachers could also check out the Whippoorwill Book Award for Rural YA Literature (<https://whippoorwillaward.weebly.com>).

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