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Connecting to Place in the Literacy Classroom

Author Biography

Rachelle Kuehl, PhD, is a postdoctoral associate at Virginia Tech and project manager of the Appalachian Rural Talent Initiative, a project aimed at increasing the number of rural Appalachian students served in Gifted and Talented programs. Dr. Kuehl is a reading specialist and former elementary teacher whose articles about writing instruction, children's literature, teacher education, and rural education have been published in the *English Journal*, *Journal of Children's Literature*, *Theory & Practice in Rural Education*, *Collection Management*, *Reading in Virginia*, *Journal of Literacy Innovation*, and the *Teacher Educators' Journal*. She is co-author of a chapter on phonics and phonemic awareness in *What's Hot in Literacy? Exemplar Models of Effective Practice* (2020) as well as two other chapters in forthcoming volumes.

Abstract

Motivation research indicates that students need to be interested in the subject matter about which they are learning, and this article describes how connecting to place can pique students' interest in writing and reading tasks. Place-based literacy practices, or those that allow opportunities for students to explore their out-of-school interests in authentic ways, have been shown to engage rural students in literacy learning. This article presents examples of writing projects found in the literature that incorporate an emphasis on place (e.g., photo essays, project-based learning assignments, community interviews). Resources for helping students find books connected to their sense of place are provided.

Keywords

place, place-based literacy instruction, motivation, interest

Connecting to Place in the Literacy Classroom

Combining decades of influential research in educational psychology, Jones (2018) designed the MUSIC® model to help teachers understand the five key principles that must be in place for students to feel motivated in a given learning situation: eMpowerment, Usefulness, Success, Interest, and Caring. According to Jones (2018):

Instructors need to ensure that students feel *empowered* by having the ability to make decisions about some aspects of their learning; understand why what they are learning is *useful* for their short or long-term goals; believe they can *succeed* if they put forth the effort required; are *interested* in the content and instructional activities; and believe that others in the learning environment, such as the instructor and other students, *care* about their learning and about them as a person. (p. 9, emphasis in original)

Using a place-based curriculum can enable literacy teachers to meet many, if not all, of these criteria. Rural education research has showed that tapping into students' place interests can be a successful approach when working with rural students (Azano, 2011), who make up a large proportion of the PreK–12 student population in Virginia (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

In this article, I first describe how teachers can enact a place-based literacy pedagogy, highlighting a study that showed positive results for creative writing. Next, I share additional examples of writing assignments and project-based learning opportunities teachers who desire to focus their instruction on place could emulate. I conclude by suggesting reading selections that may appeal to Virginia students because of their connections to place.

Place-Based Writing Instruction

Teachers can leverage curriculum connections to place to increase student engagement in various ways. A sense of place is a person's connection to where they live (or have spent time) and the community with whom they share that space. Place informs our identity (McInerney et al., 2011) in that who we are is strongly related to where we come from. Teachers practicing a place-based pedagogy plan lessons that incorporate concepts important to the local community (i.e., caring for waterways, expanding employment opportunities, passing along local history), then show how these ideas relate to the larger global community (Azano, 2019). In their article discussing an argument writing unit designed to motivate rural students, Ruday and Azano (2019) explained that "Place-based writing instruction . . . provides the *culturally* relevant work to become *locally* relevant, exploring the various cultures experienced in a student's family and community" (p. 2). Because it taps into students' interests outside of school, place-based instruction has long been considered a way to help students feel that what they are learning in the classroom is useful to them (Dewey, 1916/1985)—it adds *relevance*. Curricular relevance, according to Keller (1983), is a "learner's perception that important personal needs are being met by the learning situation" (p. 406), and it is a feeling that often eludes rural students (Azano, 2011). In essence, if teachers can find a way to connect learning to rural students' interests, their students will be more motivated to learn.

In a study about elementary writing, Kuehl (2020) found that 43% of rural fourth graders reflected a sense of place with respect to their communities in the narrative fiction stories they wrote after being taught using a place-based language arts curriculum. Given the freedom to write about anything they wanted, some students composed stories centered completely around activities common in their particular rural communities (e.g., deer hunting, farming, ocean fishing), and others reflected the closeness often found among people living in small rural

communities. Kuehl found that boys were especially apt to write about rural topics, which is important because other research has indicated a need to find ways to engage boys in the language arts due to their tendency to lag behind girls in writing achievement (Olinghouse, 2008). Further, the stories Kuehl found to contain the strongest emphasis on things of a rural nature tended not to be the same stories that demonstrated high achievement with regard to story development, plot cohesion, and use of dialogue and advanced vocabulary. In other words, students who struggle with language arts tasks may be especially likely to respond to teaching that is grounded in place.

Infusing Place into Writing Assignments

In addition to fiction writing, there are countless ways teachers can use place to help students build connections to the curriculum. For example, the National Writing Project has conducted an annual “Write In” where writing teachers across the United States bring students outdoors to write. The Write In follows a history of The National Writing Project’s investment in place-based writing (see Brooke, 2003). To begin an exploration of place in the literacy classroom, teachers may want to ask students to explore the following ideas (both in writing and in class discussions):

- Where do you feel most at home? Please use sensory details (sights, sounds, etc.) to describe what this place is like.
- Describe your hometown for someone who has never been there. What are the people like? What do people do for work? For fun?
- What are the things you like best about living in your community? What are some ways your community could be improved?

- Walk outside with your notebook and look around. Then, sit down and describe the landscape. Are there mountains, fields, or bodies of water nearby? What animals and plants share your space?

In the following paragraphs, I share a variety of ways teachers and scholars have helped students make connections to place through writing.

Community Interviews

Teachers have found success having students interview community members to find out more about the history and culture of the place in which they live (Stanton & Sutton, 2012). Coleman (2011) conducted a project where students in a remote fishing village interviewed members of the community about their jobs, then wrote informational articles that were later published in a community newspaper. Similarly, recognizing that oral literacies were a prevalent part of the Indigenous culture of the Northern Canadian communities in which they lived, a group of teachers tasked students with conducting interviews with community elders (Catlin, 2013). The writing project incorporated photos and audio recordings that were later shared on social media, which some elders welcomed as an opportunity to spread knowledge of their language and traditions to a broader audience.

Digital Tools

Digital tools can be especially effective for creating engaging narratives about place. Audio recording features can be found on nearly any cell phone, allowing students to capture conversations with interview subjects easily, and programs like Zoom can make it easy for students to meet with community members online when getting together in person is not possible. In fact, some students—particularly those whose families have immigrated recently—

identify with their family's country of origin as their "place," and students could use the internet to interview someone living there, even if it is geographically distant.

Powerpoint and Google Slides can allow students to create photo essays about place. In a study by Chisholm and Trent (2013), students in a rural Kentucky high school used technology to combine photographs and captions to tell a story about place. Through the photos, one student described her love of her farm, her horses, and her family, demonstrating that place-focused composition using multimedia techniques can both motivate students and bring about a deeper understanding of place as a core component of their identities.

Art and Poetry

Place-based practices can elicit creative responses in art and poetry as well. In one study (Wolf, 2006), local artists and poets visited young children in a rural seaside town, helping them to create poems and dioramas that reflected their sense of place and their individual personalities. In another (Wason-Ellam, 2010), an elementary teacher shared picture books about rural places, then brought students outdoors to reflect on their own surroundings. The students then wrote poems and created artwork that revealed details about their identities in relation to place, allowing the teacher to meet their learning needs more effectively going forward.

Project-Based Learning

Place-based literacy practices can be easily incorporated into project-based learning. For example, a group of third-grade students in North Carolina became very excited about researching information about local wildlife, interviewing fellow citizens about their interactions with nature, and reporting their findings on a blog (Duke, 2016). In another study (Comber et al., 2001), Australian elementary students wanted more trees to be planted near their school, so they researched the benefits of trees and conducted an assessment of the number and condition of

trees in the surrounding neighborhood. Then they wrote letters to local government officials asking for trees to be planted and included drawings of their visions for what their neighborhood could look like. Conducting this project helped students see their own agency in bringing about positive changes for their community, and the authentic purpose motivated students to communicate effectively.

In a similar project, a professor in Queens, New York, saw the need to help her students think critically about place and realize negative judgments might prevent them from seeing the beauty and value of their urban community (Esposito, 2012). After studying the concept of place, students created public service announcements via signs, audio recordings, and videos to encourage fellow citizens to help take care of their neighborhood. “It’s our job,” wrote Esposito (2012), “to help students identify those places . . . that are personally significant and engage them in meaningful work that deals with real issues” (p. 71).

Place-Based Reading

Many scholars (e.g., Bishop, 1990; Ebarvia, 2019; McNair, 2016) have written about the importance of students being able to read about people like themselves in books so they receive the message that their experiences are valued in society. For rural students, this can mean helping them to find books set in rural places where characters engage in the same types of activities they themselves enjoy. Because students are likely to take an interest in reading books set in familiar places, the Richmond Public Library recognizes the best young adult books written by Virginia authors each year (<https://rvalibrary.org/events/yava>). Past winners include *Come August, Come Freedom* by Gigi Amateau (2012), which tells the story of a man leading a rebellion against the Virginians who enslaved him. Additionally, the National Rural Education Association has launched the Whippoorwill Award for excellence in rural young adult literature

(<https://whippoorwillaward.weebly.com/>). *Give Me Some Truth* by Eric Gansworth (2018), a novel about teens navigating life on and off the fictionalized Tuscarora Nation reservation, was one of the inaugural winners of the award.

For younger readers interested in learning about Virginia's past, I recommend Ruth White's middle grade novels, including *Belle Prater's Boy* (1996) and *Little Audrey* (2008). Those who like fantastical stories would enjoy *The Last Last-Day-of-Summer* by Lamar Giles (2019), which takes place in a fictional Virginia small town, and fans of author Jason Reynolds would appreciate his Virginia-set novel, *As Brave as You* (2015). Sarah Dooley's (2017) *Ashes to Asheville* depicts a journey taken by bereaved sisters with key stops in places such as Wytheville and Bristol, both in southwest Virginia.

Finally, the Virginia State Literacy hosts the Virginia Readers' Choice awards, an annual competition in which classrooms across the commonwealth read and vote on books at the primary, elementary, middle, and high school levels. Though nominated authors need not be Virginia residents, the program builds a sense of community among participants, which in turn helps to enhance the connection to place.

Conclusion

In their study of high-ability writers, Garrett and Moltzen (2011) wrote that "effective teachers are those with an awareness of the conditions motivating young writers to write with ease." Grounding students' literacy learning in a sense of place helps establish such conditions. Place-based learning can be as simple as allowing students to choose any topic they want for a research project, argumentative essay, or creative writing assignment and encouraging them to think of subjects near and dear to their hearts. Further, introducing them to books connected to place—and teaching them to recognize those connections—can motivate students to see reading

as a useful endeavor that leads them to new discoveries about “the places, people, and interests that make their world personally meaningful” (Bangert & Brooke, 2003, p. 23).

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