

# Rural Elementary Teachers and Place-Based Connections to Text During Reading Instruction

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*Schooling can play a role in bolstering a sense of community, but research suggests that curriculum may serve to isolate teachers and students from their rural surroundings. In this qualitative case study, we asked if the literacy curriculum and instruction supported readers to make connections to their rural setting. We analyzed curriculum materials, field notes from classroom observations, and interview transcripts of teachers to describe elementary students' opportunities to make connections to their rural setting. Analysis revealed that the commercial curriculum provided limited support for making connections to readers' rural backgrounds. Further, although teachers were interconnected with the rural community, attempts to weave complex connections to place were rare. Findings suggest that the curriculum fell short of integrating the community and the world. Rather, the rural teacher was the source for guiding students to make place-based connections.*

American schools often ignore students' individual realities, including the context of the places in which they live (Gruenewald, 2003) and instead embrace standardizing policies such as the Common Core State Standards (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012) and commercial curricula that comply with state and federal policies. For example, rural and urban schools alike are incentivized to adopt the same federal standards to which the same commercial textbooks and high-stakes tests are aligned.

A standardizing approach to education can be problematic for all schools, but especially for rural schools. Local priorities that focus on community are sidelined in favor of national policies and commercial curricula that generalize rather than particularize students' realities (Bomer & Maloch, 2012). In the context of rural education, Donehower, Hogg, and Schell (2007) interpret the word standardization as "code for erasing differences of culture, race, ethnicity, class and linguistic usage" (p. 23). This *pedagogy of erasure*, a term coined by Eppley (2011), occurs when "the students and what they know are erased in favor of standardization and quantifiable result" (p. 3). When the unique qualities of community, economy, and

natural world are supplanted by "school-centric curriculum" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 646), rural students' academic setting lacks curricular support for connection with place. In contrast, Luke (2003) stresses that in a globalized society students need experiences with text that encourage critical thinking both inwardly and outwardly.

Rural schools have potential to help rural students experience literature as threads that weave together the community and the world. During reading instruction, for example, teachers can help students reflect on school and community by modeling and teaching readers how to make connections between text and place. With a foundational grasp of community, they can lead students in discussions on the interrelatedness of home and the world. Given the extensive reach of curricular standardization, however, rural teachers may not be weaving the fabric that unites school and community. Foundational attention to community may instead be ignored as curricular content that students need help understanding. In this article, we discuss how teachers in a rural school scaffold weaving these connections. While we focus on community and teaching readers to make connections to community, the overarching goal is for literacy education to prepare students for an "interconnected and complex world" (Luke, 2003, p 20).

## Schools, Curriculum, Teachers, and Place

Ironically, schooling, with its focus decoupled from community, may end up marginalizing the very community

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that it is intended to serve (Gruenewald, 2003). Lester (2012), when writing about instructional strategies for rural literacy, points out that students are cognizant of their education's failure to aid them in understanding and appreciating their own community, their place. A student states, "Nothing in my education prepared me to believe, or encouraged me to expect, that there was any reason to be interested in my own place" (p. 409).

Schooling, however, can play a role in bolstering a sense of community. An educational approach connecting schools and community is called *place-based education*. In this approach to schooling, the aim of education is to "ground learning in local phenomena and students' lived experiences" (Smith, 2002, p. 586). Further, place-based education "provides a rich avenue for learning centered on helping students make connections between curriculum and their community's culture, environment and history" (Lester, 2012, p. 409).

Unfortunately, standardizing educational policies are prone to deter teachers from adapting curriculum to encompass place-based content. Rather, these policies promote inflexible use of commercial curricula. As Jaeger (2013) states, "if there exists an opportunity to tell teachers exactly what to do and when to do it—and make money off doing so—there will be no shortage of entities ready to take advantage of that opportunity" (p. 85). This dutiful implementation of mass-market curricula has consequences. According to Gruenewald (2003), it results in trading individual specificities of place for uniformity. The uniformity of mass media can situate rural communities in a position of *other*; the complexities of rural life are too often exchanged for a "decontextualized, standardized, metrocentric education" (Corbett, 2013, p. 2). Becoming *the other* is counterproductive in showing "students how to use literacy to go inward and outward" (Luke, 2003, p. 20) because both are needed to build an understanding of learning to act in self-determining ways and "live together *in our differences* rather than in spite of them (Luke, 2003, p. 21; italics in original).

Despite the role that commercial curricula can play in separating community and school, estrangement from place in rural schools is somewhat surprising. Rural teachers are well-equipped to unite schools and place in the classroom. They tend to live in their schools' rural communities, have strong ties with their students, and possess in-depth knowledge about their students and the community (Barley & Beesley, 2007). Guiding students to make place-based connections in the learning setting would therefore seem to be routine instructional practice for rural teachers. And yet, the current policy environment and institutional norms of educational practice are likely to mitigate place-based pedagogy.

### Reading Comprehension, Instruction, and Place

Personal meaning is essential to comprehension of text. Probst (1994) states, "meaning lies in that shared ground where the reader and text meet" (p. 38), affirming that reading is a personal experience. Reading educators describe personalizing text as a strategic process of making connections. Making connections is viewed as a key comprehension strategy that readers must learn. However, personalizing text does not come automatically for many readers (Keene & Zimmermann, 2007). Zimmermann and Hutchins (2003) describe making connections as a schema-based process involving "a weaving of past with present, an amalgam of old and new ideas with experiences" (p. 45). Specifically, a connection occurs when readers have "the realization that newly learned concepts fit with and extend existing background knowledge, and make sense in relation to what is already known; they affirm our existing knowledge" (Keene, 2008, p. 237).

Literacy educators acknowledge three types of schema-building connections: text-to-text, text-to-world, and text-to-self (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006; Harvey & Goudvis, 2007; Keene, 2008; Miller, 2008, 2013; Zimmerman & Hutchins, 2003). Fountas and Pinnell (2006) describe each type of connection. A *text-to-text* connection occurs when a reader uses content or interpretations from previous reading experiences and makes connections between texts. When a reader weaves together new information from a text with existing background knowledge, he or she is making a *text-to-world* connection. When making a *text-to-self* connection, a reader draws upon a schema that is personal and can include "memories, emotions, attitudes, perspectives and sensory images" (p. 43).

Since making connections (and other reading strategies) is an invisible reading behavior, Miller (2013) recommends that teachers provide explicit instruction on how to make personal (and other) connections to text. She advocates that teachers demonstrate for readers how to make connections. Demonstration or modeling takes on various forms, such as explaining what a connection is, thinking aloud to show connections the teacher makes, and talking through readers' connections.

Reading educators view personalized connections as essential to reading comprehension (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006; Harvey & Goudvis, 2007; Keene, 2008; Miller, 2013). However, current literature may not go far enough to give teachers permission to teach readers to make deeply meaningful place-based connections. Rather, the focus is more generalized. We define *place-based connections* as a subset of personal connections to text through which readers engage their personal surroundings and lives in the community with text.

Making place-based connections with text is an important learning tool for rural students. Readers learn to use text as a vehicle to affirm their rural identities in a world in which rural residents are often placed as other (Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2007) and as “quaint, hardworking and useful as long as they don’t require federal resources” (Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2012, p. xiii). According to Pennell (2014), the Common Core State Standards advocate for an approach to reading in which “the single meaning discovered through close reading is meant to be uniform and even between readers” (p. 251). Yet, Pennell (2014) and Compton-Lilly and Stewart (2013) call for an approach that allows for multiple realities. While a globalized approach can disregard the local needs of rural residents (Edmondson, 2003), ideally place-based connections allow readers to look critically at their own context without being parochial (Luke, 2003).

Given that commercial curricula may serve to isolate teachers and students from their surroundings, rather than serve as a tool for teachers to apply their unique knowledge of students and place, we wanted to describe what reading instruction was like in a rural setting in the age of the Common Core. We wanted to know if during literacy learning the rural readers in our study were taught to make connections to place. We asked three questions. First, did the *teachers’ backgrounds* in our research setting support making place-based connections? Research suggests those who teach in rural settings usually have the strong community ties needed to do so (Barley & Beesley, 2007), but we wanted to explore this idea further. Second, we asked if the *reading curriculum* used in our rural research site supported making place-based connections during reading instruction. Third, we asked if teachers’ *literacy instruction* supported making connections. Were readers taught this comprehension strategy? We specifically wanted to identify literacy instruction that called for students to learn how to make connections to their rural backgrounds.

### Methods

To address our research questions, we used a qualitative, instrumental case study design that also included some numerical descriptive analysis (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). For the purposes of this study, we used the term *place-based connections* to embody all connections pertaining to location and community. Further, place-based connections were viewed as a subset of text-to-self connections since place and community are an integral element of identity (Gruenewald, 2003).

### The Site

This study was situated in Garfield (a pseudonym), a rural community with a population of approximately

700 in the Upper Midwest. Garfield is comprised mostly of residents who have lived in Garfield or the region for generations, although some families have moved to Garfield because of its proximity to a military base, and other new families have been drawn to Garfield because of low housing prices. At Garfield School, 29% of students were eligible for free and reduced-price lunches. Garfield was chosen for the study because we had some familiarity with the community, but we did not know any of the teachers personally. Also, the school is not consolidated, so it is positioned as a central part of the community.

The K-12 school in our study is small, housing only one teacher per grade at the K-6 levels. The average K-6 classroom size was twelve students, with each elementary grade having its own classroom. The school building was built in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the classrooms have a modern feel. Each classroom is equipped with an electronic white board, which allows teachers to access the Internet, present slideshows, and lead technology-based lessons. The classrooms are inviting, with handmade and commercial décor.

### Participants

This case study included as participants three teachers, all of whom were under the supervision of an elementary school principal who extended autonomy to the classroom teachers, allowing them to make choices on curriculum. The professional experience of these participants ranged from 20-32 years. Mrs. Anderson (all names are pseudonyms) was from Garfield and lived there. She had been teaching first grade at Garfield School for 12 years. For eight years previously, she had taught several other grade levels at Garfield. Mrs. Lee, the third grade teacher, was originally from a rural farming community about 15 miles from Garfield. She had 28 years of teaching experience, and like Mrs. Anderson, she had previously held a variety of positions in the school, but she had been teaching third grade since 1985. Mrs. Smith, the fourth grade teacher, had lived in Garfield for 31 years and grew up in a nearby small town. She was in her eighteenth year of teaching fourth grade at Garfield School. Previously, she had held other positions in the school, including teaching physical education, library, and kindergarten.

### Data Collection and Analysis

We analyzed multiple data sources (Creswell, 2013) for this study: documents, classroom observations, and participant interviews. A unit from the third grade commercial reading program was selected for analysis because it contained a story which took place in a rural setting. We opted to use the third grade curriculum because Mrs. Lee, the third grade teacher, used this basal series the

most extensively of the three teachers who were observed. We analyzed one unit of study, which included four stories. Analysis of the reading unit involved coding directives in the basal that guided the teacher to instruct students to make connections as a comprehension strategy. These directives were coded for type of connection (text-to-self, text-to-world, and text-to-text) and the frequency with which each type occurred. The story with the rural setting was further analyzed. Overall, attention was paid in the analysis to Garfield students' opportunity to make connections between text in the commercial curriculum and their own rural setting.

Our primary data source was the observation of classroom literacy events and recorded field notes. Three classrooms were observed: grades 1, 3, and 4. A total of 15 classroom observations were conducted. Two audio-recorded interviews were conducted with each teacher to create an iterative process between observing and interviewing (Seidman, 2012).

Analysis of interviews and observations involved coding words, lines, and incidents from the field notes and transcripts. Phases of data analysis progressed from open coding to complex webbing and diagramming, as suggested by Corbin and Strauss (2008). Researchers used close rereading and discussion to agree on coding and other layers of the analysis. Thick description (Creswell, 2013) and memo writing (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2013; Glesne, 2006) were used to ensure saturated and reflective data collection. Ongoing contact with participants provided opportunity to seek clarification on reading instruction and teachers' backgrounds.

## Results

### Teachers and Place

Each teacher had longstanding ties with the community. The interviews revealed that each of the teachers had lived in Garfield or the close surrounding area for virtually her entire life. Mrs. Anderson, the first grade teacher, explained, "I grew up here, so I graduated from Garfield, and I've been teaching here since 1991. I have lots of family here; I've been here my whole life." Mrs. Lee also discussed her family ties to the area: "My parents moved back from Wyoming, and they actually live in Garfield.... They moved to Garfield in 1985." Mrs. Smith stated that she had grown up in a neighboring community and now, she admits, "I haven't ventured too far."

Mrs. Anderson's deeply rooted connections stemmed from strong family connections and ties to the land. For instance, she stated that although she had earned her administrator license, she preferred to stay in Garfield than try to go to another town for a new position. She stated, "My

family is here. I wouldn't go too far. If there's somewhere within driving distance or that type of thing, once my kids are out of school, I would consider it." For Mrs. Lee, these deep connections came from ties to the family farm. She reported, "My husband's parents lived on the farm we are living on now. He's lived in Garfield his whole life." Despite an economic downturn that has caused her husband to take on multiple jobs, they have remained on the farm. She stated,

He was a farmer, and when farming became kind of a disaster, we gave that up, and he's been doing other types of things since then. He's done some driving bus, worked for ... some area farmers, and he worked at an airplane manufacturing company.

Mrs. Smith also discussed her family ties, including driving her sister, who had cancer, from Garfield to a nearby metropolitan area for treatments.

Teachers in this rural school had a deep knowledge of each of their students, and their ties within the school ran deep. Mrs. Lee described her class as very close, "like a family." This family atmosphere extends into the community as well. She explained:

I love the support system that is in a small community.... It's like a family. I think that the classroom becomes a family. And within the community, I think it becomes an extended family, and there is closeness. People are concerned about their neighbors. People are concerned about family members, even extended family members that may be in a bigger city. They wouldn't have as much contact with each other because they're more involved with their own lifestyle and their own family, or their own friends, and that kind of thing.

She also explained that in her 28 years of teaching, she had taught many of her current students' parents. These relationships allowed her to know her students on a deep level:

You maybe know some things about the parents or the grandparents that they would maybe rather that you didn't know. It can maybe set you up for a little bit of thinking that a child isn't going to get beyond where their parents got, that kind of thing. I try to be very fair and not have biases toward the children because of that.

This intergenerational feel was also evident in our observations. The hallways were lined with photos of previous students and school trophies won from years past.

Many of the family names of these students matched names of the students in this study.

This close knowledge of students was also evident with Mrs. Anderson and Mrs. Smith. In their interviews, both told detailed stories about their students. Further, both were involved in supporting the community through involvement with extracurricular activities such as attending district basketball tournaments or coaching speech and debate.

The school's small size invited opportunity for teachers to form tightly knit relationships with their students, and there was a general sense of togetherness. The physical layout of the school meant that the K-12 classrooms were in close proximity to each other and invited interactions among all students, and on a daily basis the entire school (including the teachers) ate meals cooked from scratch. High school students were often observed interacting with younger students, helping them with reading, helping them to tie their shoes, and visiting with them in the hallways.

### Reading Basal Program and Place-Based Connections

To understand opportunities for teachers to facilitate place-based connections when using the adopted reading curriculum, we examined a unit of study in the third grade basal reading program (Cooper & Pikulski, 1998) for the connections teachers were directed to have readers make. This unit was chosen because the setting, or *place*, for each story was central to the plot and the setting of one of the stories was rural. The unit contained a total of four stories which were grouped together under the theme *Incredible Stories*. The setting for each story had realistic elements, although the stories were fantasies: *Dogzilla* (Pilkey, 2001), set in the city of Mousopolis; *The Mysterious Giant of Barletta* (DePaola, 1984), set in Barletta, Italy; *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi* (Van Allsburg, 1979), set in a garden in a community that could be either urban or rural; and *Raising Dragons* (Nolen, 1998), set on a rural farm.

As is typical in teachers' editions of reading basal programs, the stories in this unit are annotated throughout with directives for instruction. These directives are statements that prompt teachers to interject vocabulary instruction, ask questions about characters, and make connections. For this unit, each story included a variety of annotations for the teacher to use to guide readers to make text-to-self, text-to-world, and text-to-text connections. In Table 1 we summarize the content of the connections.

For this analysis, text-to-self-connections included those annotations in which students were given an opportunity to make a connection to their own lives (Keene & Zimmermann, 2007) and were most closely associated with our research question about readers' opportunity to make place-based connections during reading instruction.

The content of these connections included connections to topics such as their own emotions, families, pets, and community. Text-to-text connections included those annotations in which teachers were asked to direct children to connect to other books or stories. Most often, these text-to-text connections were contained within the basal and directed readers to connect to the unit theme, *Incredible Stories*, but some were about making connections to books by the same author and to books within the same genre or on the same topic. For example, teachers were instructed to ask children to identify other books about monsters when they read *Dogzilla* (Pilkey, 2001), which is a takeoff on the movie character Godzilla. Finally, directives in the basal unit prompted teachers to ask children to make text-to-world connections. An example of a text-to-world connection included connecting to a historic event, such as using *The Mysterious Giant of Barletta* (DePaola, 1984) to discuss why kings used to make people pay taxes. In addition to making explicit text-to-world connections, the basal unit placed emphasis on building and activating prior knowledge that was critical to understanding the story. For example, teachers were directed to show students new places on a map. This practice may appear to be making a place-based connection, but we viewed it as a text-to-world connection since it was about building new knowledge and not about making a connection to readers' own lives.

After describing the connections, we documented the frequency with which each type of connection occurred in the reading unit in the basal program. Of the total 60 connections, we identified 31 text-to-text connections (51.6%), which accounted for the majority of the connections offered in the unit. There were also many directives about making connections to world events or knowledge (20 connections or 33.3%). Much more limited were text-to-self connections, with only 9 connections (14.9%) directing teachers to have children make connections to experiences in their own lives.

We further analyzed the story *Raising Dragons* (Cooper & Pikulski, 2001) to document how farming and farmers were represented since this setting seems most similar to Garfield, which is surrounded by crop fields. Overall, the story portrays rural life in a folksy and perhaps obsolete manner. The main character is "Pa," the farmer. He raises tomatoes, corn, peas, barley, wheat, sheep, cows, pigs, and chickens, which is described as "just about everything we needed for life on our farm" (p. 320). Both Pa and his daughter wear bib overalls. Pa uses phrases such as "What in the tarnation?" to respond to the idea of raising dragons. Essentially, attire and dialect depict caricatures of farmers and farm families.

The unit story is prefaced by a one-page factual statement about farming. The photographs accompanying the statement show farmers in bib overalls picking bell

Table 1

*Connections presented in the reading basal unit*

Type of Connection	Content of the Connection
Text-to-self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connecting to an emotion</li> <li>• Connecting to family/pets</li> <li>• Connecting to the community</li> </ul>
Text-to-text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connecting to a theme</li> <li>• Connecting to books by the same author</li> <li>• Connecting to the genre</li> </ul>
Text-to-world	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connecting to a historical event</li> <li>• Connecting to a media event/movie</li> <li>• Activating background knowledge of a place</li> <li>• Building background knowledge of a place</li> <li>• Activating background knowledge of a concept</li> <li>• Building background knowledge of a concept</li> </ul>

peppers and carrots. The photographs suggest that on this single farm, cattle, apples, and row crops are raised simultaneously. The farm machinery shown is quite old and small, not representative of the large-scale farming that is now more commonplace in rural areas. This introductory information is of interest because one might think it would help children from a rural area such as Garfield make a personal connection. The farming portrayed in the textbook, however, actually looks quite different from the rural community that we observed, where small family farms have given way to large corporate farms.

### Teachers' Instruction and Making Connections

Interview data offered contextual information about how the teachers taught reading and their instructional approach on how to make connections. Observational data revealed examples of making place-based connections during reading instruction. The examples range from being weakly to strongly rooted in community, from basic to complex connections.

**Mrs. Anderson.** When asked about her approach to teaching reading, Mrs. Anderson stated, "The first big goal in first grade is getting them to know what the letters are, and then the sounds, of course, the rules for the sounds because digraphs, trigraphs, and vowels all make more than one sound.... All of those rules." In support of this goal, Mrs. Anderson used a commercial scripted phonics curriculum for instruction. She used this program for about 60 minutes each day except on Fridays when instead students took a spelling test. She also used decodable, leveled books for small group instruction. She discussed one child's experience with decodable text:

I had a boy that I retained in first grade because he couldn't get off Level A; over the summer, I sent

those [decodable] texts home, and in the summer, Mom sat every day and had him read a couple of them. He came back in the fall and I tested him and he was already at [a level] F.

Addressing a question about the importance of comprehension, she stated, "There isn't a lot to comprehend in [our phonics readers]. I'd say it's probably secondary to learning how to read for first grade."

Mrs. Anderson's beliefs about reading instruction are reflected in her teaching. In one teaching episode, her phonics instruction shows how she integrated a connection to place that is slightly rooted in community. During a whole-class phonics lesson, she directed the first graders to write missing segments of words on the daily worksheet. During this particular lesson, one of the missing word segments was the suffix "-tion." She presented students with a picture card, and said, "The picture clue is lo-tion, lotion. What letters spell /-tion/?" Next, the students were to write in the letters "t-i-o-n" to complete some of the words on the worksheet. One of the incomplete words was "vaca\_\_\_\_\_." The first graders struggled to complete the word, so to aid solving it, Mrs. Anderson gave a clue related to a student's family, saying, "Jackson's parents are taking this right now—a \_\_\_\_\_." Readily, students were then able to supply the correct word, *vacation*.

Mrs. Anderson personalized the literacy interaction by connecting to a student's family. She and all the students knew Jackson's parents were taking a vacation. The connection may not lead to a deepened understanding of community, yet it plays a small role in bringing personal experiences within the community into the classroom.

**Mrs. Lee.** The third grade teacher's approach to teaching reading was revealed in multiple ways. When asked how she chose what to cover from the basal reading program, Mrs. Lee stated, "I try to pick out the skills that I feel are life

skills, the ones [that the students] are going to need. Nouns and verbs, of course, prepositional phrases, and things like that.” Observational data indicated, however, that instead of attending to parts of speech, Mrs. Lee asked students about vocabulary: “What *is* a cell?” and, “Torturous? What could they have for lunch that could be *torturous*?” and, “What is *hearty*?” To explain how she helped students comprehend text, she referred to graphic organizers with a mixed review. She explained, “Graphic organizers, some of those are very good. Some of those I don’t see much value in.” She explained that she asked questions to activate prior knowledge and connect students to what was happening in the story. She said, “I might ask things like, ‘Have you ever had...? What’s your experience with...? We generally use the first day [of the lesson] to look at the pictures and preview it some, and just talk about their own experiences.’”

Observation of Mrs. Lee’s reading instruction reflected her instructional style of asking questions to help students make connections. She used the reading basal program and directives in the teacher’s edition, but in situ, she occasionally adapted the directives to have students make connections to their own lives. For example, she facilitated making a connection with a story about spring. She asked the students to make connections with deer in their own yards.

Like the last story we read, about deer, what are your experiences with deer? Have you ever had deer in your yard? What would happen if you had deer in your yard, and you lived in Garfield?

In this instance, Mrs. Lee’s prompting for a personal connection to place was purposefully attentive to connecting to students’ personal experiences. In that moment, students were asked to think about their yard and their town to make a connection with something that was in the text.

In another example from Mrs. Lee’s reading instruction, she again adapted directives in the basal program to guide students to make personal connections. On this snowy, cold day, students were reading a short excerpt about Iceland when Mrs. Lee asked them to compare their lives to those of children who live in Iceland. To facilitate the connections, she first read questions and comments directly from the basal but then used her own questions and comments to tailor the instruction to her students.

T: What do the children in Iceland do?

T: Children in Iceland live much as you do. They eat and play. The differences may surprise you.

When there is a passage about *skyr*, a type of yogurt, she asked:

T: How many of you have eaten yogurt?

Following a passage about languages, she commented:

T: Children in Iceland learn five languages! In Garfield, we have one.

Here we observe a series of attempts to bring the text closer to the lives of the students. We see that Mrs. Lee tried to use connections to generate a sense of similarities and differences between the students in Garfield and the Icelandic children in the text. She picked up on important topics such as play, food, and language.

**Mrs. Smith.** Mrs. Smith, the fourth grade teacher, believed her primary focus as a reading teacher was to nurture a passion for reading. When asked about the central point of her reading instruction, Mrs. Smith responded that she wanted “to encourage [students] to read just to love it, and to feel like you’re somewhere else. For some children, it’s an escape.” She used “peer pressure” to persuade children to pursue new books. Students gave book talks on what they read and tried to “sell” the books to their peers. She said,

You can just tell when they share a book, it’s . . . Ah! (intake of breath) . . . You know they’re very enthusiastic over whatever it is. When they read, even in our social studies or science book, that when they’ve read something, they want to share it, and I feel like if they’re truly successful at it, they don’t want to keep it just to themselves.

In an interview, Mrs. Smith expressed that she valued having her students connect to books. When describing one of the readers in her class who loved books with dragons in them, she stated, “He can connect those dragons to almost anything because he has read so intensely, [he] absorbed so much that he can apply it to almost everything else, and it just becomes him.”

Mrs. Smith’s instruction appeared to help students weave complex place-based connections. Her approach placed readers and community at the center of making connections. One example of this practice is when she focused a series of lessons on heroes. The text used for the lessons was a story from the basal about baseball legend Lou Gehrig. During the unit and lessons, students identified personal heroes.

Mrs. Smith began the series of lessons by presenting the whole class with a brief slide show accompanied by a popular song about heroes. The slide show included various types of heroes, including famous people, such as Barack Obama, as well as members of the community, such as local firefighters and grandparents. After reading the Lou Gehrig story, students identified personal heroes from the community, many of whom were family members or members of the community, including a local veteran who had cancer. In subsequent lessons, each student wrote a brief descrip-

tion of a hero and was required to reflect on why that person was a hero. The lessons culminated with presentations about each hero, and the teacher displayed the reflections on a bulletin board.

This example of making connections is fundamentally different from the previous examples in that it demonstrates how the teacher customized the curriculum by opening up the theme of heroes to be community based. She created her own slide show depicting various heroes which allowed her to redirect the curriculum towards students' encounters with their community. As the lessons progressed, Mrs. Smith broke away from the standardized, scripted lesson to focus on local personalities and family. By presenting their heroes, students were given the opportunity to be interested in their own place.

### Discussion

Teachers in this study all used commercial reading programs for instruction. Their backgrounds supported making place-based connections, but the reading curriculum did not. Teachers' views of reading comprehension were reflected in their instruction and were a factor in what the place-based connections looked like in their classrooms. In the following sections, we discuss these conclusions and offer implications for rural educators.

#### Commercial Reading Programs and Place-Based Connections

Our findings suggest that, when using commercial reading curricula for instruction, it is challenging to use the basal program to support local realities and interweave local and external understandings. Our document analysis of the basal reading series and our observation field notes revealed an imbalance between text-to-self and text-to-world connections. The basal program directives about making text-to-self—and, specifically, place-based connections—were limited. Text-to-self connections were the least frequent (14.9%) in the unit analyzed for the study. Moreover, the nature of the text-to-self connections did not expressly activate connections to place, much less activate them in complex ways. Though text-to-world connections were more abundant, the directives failed to interweave the various types of connections. The directives did not seek to have teachers help students to reflect on the relationship between personal and world connections.

Anticipating opportunity for students and teachers to explore place-based connections, we analyzed the only story in the third grade basal that represented a rural, farm setting. After analysis, we realized the story did not represent the rural farming lifestyle in Garfield. Even the factual preface to the story did not effectively represent farming and would be unlikely to inspire place-based connection making by

teachers and students in Garfield. As such, opportunity for teachers to help students build a “tool kit for understanding, critiquing and engaging with the global flows of images and texts” (Luke, 2003, p. 20) was not supported by the commercial curriculum.

#### Teachers and Curriculum

The teachers at Garfield had intergenerational roots in Garfield and nearby rural communities. They grew up in the community, raised their own children in Garfield or nearby, and for many years made their livelihoods in the community and from the land. Thus, from a personal perspective they were richly equipped to make connections between the reading curriculum and the community. Moreover, they were given pedagogical autonomy, but they used commercial programs rather than literature as the basis for their reading instruction. This practice does not support making place-based connections.

Considering the context in which reading instruction occurs, however, teachers in any setting (rural, suburban, or urban) may find it difficult not to use commercial curriculum for instruction. Heightened accountability in schools has caused a renewed emphasis on scripted products, springing from ever increasing attention to standardized test scores and textbook companies' claims that literacy achievement is linked with fidelity of implementation. Also, implementation of the widely adopted Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts directs teachers towards text-based comprehension. The standards call for teaching readers to derive author meaning from text (Fisher & Frey, 2012) and move away from teaching readers to make personal (and thus, place-based) connections with text.

When teachers check their knowledge of community at the schoolhouse door, they fail to use their backgrounds to strengthen children's connections to community. Making connections, central to an active reading process, is shelved. The cognitive act of weaving personal experiences with new information about the community, region, and world is not called for. The work of teachers as knowers of students and texts is devalued and replaced by preselected text, predetermined content, prescribed language, and text-based interpretation of text. If rural readers are not given the opportunity to make place-based connections, the result is the continued identity of the “rural as other” that lacks education, economic, and cultural opportunities (Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2007, p. 14). Moreover, we continue to engage in “missed opportunities” (Azano, 2011, p. 9) to empower students not only to have a greater understanding of place, but of themselves in relation to place.

#### Teachers, Instruction, and Place-Based Connections

The Garfield teachers' views of reading comprehension



were reflected in how they guided readers to make personal connections to text. The first grade teacher put aside comprehension instruction and focused on getting the words right. For her, learning to read is a set of individual steps. Getting the words right using an analytic set of background knowledge about phonics is the first step. In her view, learning to comprehend is a step that comes after proficiency in decoding is developed. Making connections between text and community, then, is not part of this teacher's goals for her students. By contrast, other teachers (such as Debbie Miller, 2013) view learning to read as an integrated process of reading familiar text, using letter and sound knowledge to decode while simultaneously learning to think about the meaning of text. Integrated approaches balance instruction about letters and sounds and other word solving strategies with instruction on strategic comprehension (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006; Harvey & Goudvis, 2007; Keene & Zimmermann, 2007; Miller, 2008).

The third grade teacher in our study, Mrs. Lee, appears somewhat attentive to connecting text and students' personal experiences. She used questioning to have students to think about their yard and their town to make a connection with something in the text. But, in the larger scheme, it seems the connections fail to weave a web of interactions about place. For example, there was an opportunity to weave a strong place-based connection between Garfield and Iceland. The climate in Iceland is quite similar to that of this small Midwestern community, particularly on the day of the observation with snowy and subzero conditions looming outside of the classroom. Mrs. Lee could have expanded students' thinking by comparing the two climates and discussing activities children would do in the wintertime, which would be quite similar. Instead, she used the connection to focus on yogurt, which is a thin thread of information to weave a lasting connection about identity between two locations. Notions of children in Iceland and Garfield, in these far apart locations who on a snowy day, would both likely throw snowballs, sled down hills and ice skate were unexplored. Instead, the threads turn into loose ends of unexplored connections and isolated commentary.

Thus, despite her own connectedness to the community, the teacher's deviation from school-centric curriculum tended to be minimal and lacking in opportunity to open up the curriculum for connecting to students' community and the world. This finding is consistent with Azano's (2011) work in which she studied place-based curriculum in a rural high school. Although the high school English teacher did make place-based connections, Azano found there were often "missed opportunities" (p. 9) to draw upon place. Further, the connections did not facilitate critical thinking, as suggested by Luke (2003).

Mrs. Smith, the fourth grade teacher, wanted to facilitate students' passion for reading. This may have fueled her to take risks to customize the basal curriculum and open

the theme of heroes to be community based. She created her own slide show depicting various heroes which allowed her to redirect the curriculum towards students' encounters with their community. As the lesson progressed, Mrs. Smith broke away from the standardized, scripted lesson to focus on local personalities and family. By having students present their hero, they were given opportunity to be interested in their own place. Again, this finding is consistent with the work of Azano (2011) in which she also found that when teachers bring in local knowledge to the classroom, a weaving of schema and the new content occurs. Still, even with Mrs. Smith's robust approach to making text-to-place connections, an instructional issue looms. In the case of all three teachers, none of them intentionally modeled for the students how readers make connections with text. Recall that Miller (2013) recommends showing students to personalize text by connecting memories and experiences with the text. Miller explains that using a think aloud approach, the act of making text-to-place connections becomes a known process to readers. She advocates demonstrating to students, how experienced readers purposefully used their background, their schema, to personally comprehend text. She recommends telling young readers (including first graders) this act of making connections is essential to construct meaning while reading. Teachers in our study, however, were much more passive in their instruction about *how* readers make connections. At different levels of complexity, the teachers *used* the making connections strategy, but without explicit intention or explanation about what readers do to make connections and why. Rather, in these classrooms, the comprehension strategy, at best, was "caught" by the learners, but not taught.

### Implications for Rural Educators

Because the curriculum is unlikely to support teachers who want to unite school and community, the teachers themselves will need to facilitate place-based connections. Teachers must intentionally develop ways to keep the focus on the reader and the community, because as expressed by Glasswell and Ford (2011, p. 209), "a teacher's professional judgment still remains the critical factor in planning and implementing successful reading instruction." This calls for teachers to be flexible in how they implement directives in commercial curriculum (Dewitz & Jones, 2013). Replacing or recasting questions and discussion prompts towards community is a place to begin. Thus, when using the story *Raising Dragons* (Nolen, 1998), a teacher could discuss how modern farms generally are larger than the ones represented and that usually, farming and ranching are two separate entities. Teachers could also discuss that farms are seldom self-sufficient any longer, and generally more specialized than the portrayal in *Raising Dragons* (Nolen, 1998). Children in rural communities are likely to know this, but

the teacher's guidance would be advantageous to readers in that it would enable them not only to think critically about the text, but to draw on their prior knowledge of place to build a connection.

Instead of teachers checking their knowledge of community at the schoolhouse door, we recommend that teachers intentionally use their knowledge and commitment to community during literacy instruction. Teachers can directly model how they bring their personal knowledge about their rural community to bear on what they are reading. Modeling being gripped by a story because of personal connections not only reveals this process of making connections, but it gives readers permission to use their sense of place while reading and find themselves at "home" in a book (Waller, 2011). Further, making personal connections is not an approach that encourages parochialism (Luke, 2003; Smith, 2002) because readers use their personal experiences to fabricate new views and understandings, to see themselves in the local and broader world context.

Finally, the teachers in this study tended to rely heavily on commercial curricula as the basis for reading material during instruction. Given that rural teachers tend to know their students and community very well, why not seek out and use literature for reading instruction that lends itself to exploring the rural experience? For younger students, literature such as Rylant's (1985) *The Relatives Came*, which explores families' reuniting in a rural setting, can become a touchstone story for making place-based connections. Literature commonly used in intermediate classrooms such as *Bridge to Terabithia* (Paterson, 1977) can be a source for making connections to place. In this book the boy, Jess, lives on a family farm and endures frustrations of being a farm boy who is interested in art and music. While exploring central themes in the book (e.g., nonconformity, friendship, and loss), pursuing text-to-place connections can support students' rural identity. For older readers, Weaver's (1995) *Farm Team* can serve as text for book club discussion. Rural students will relate to Billy, the main character, who has to place farm chores ahead of his favorite activity—base-

Table 2

*Place-based children's literature*

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**Picture Books**

- Aardema, V. (1981). *Bringing the rain to Kapiti Plain*. New York, NY: E.P. Dutton.  
 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.  
 Pochocki, E. (1989). *Rosebud and Red Flannel*. New York, NY: Henry Holt.  
 MacLachlan, P. (1994). *All the places to love*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.  
 Moore, Y. & Bannatyne-Cugnet, J. (1992). *A prairie alphabet*. Toronto, ON: Tundra Books.  
 Rylant, C. (1985). *The relatives came*. New York, NY: Bradbury Press  
 Schertle, A. (1995). *Down the road*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace.  
 Siebert, D. (1989). *Heartland*. New York, NY: Thomas Y. Crowell.  
 Yolen, J. (1987). *Owl moon*. New York, NY: Putnam Publishing Group.
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**Chapter Books**

- Di Camillo, K. (2000). *Because of Winn-Dixie*. New York, NY: Scholastic.  
 Gardiner, J. R. (1980). *Stone Fox*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.  
 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.  
 Reynolds, P. N. (1991). *Shiloh*. New York, NY: Dell.  
 Weaver, W. (1995). *Farm team*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.  
 White, E. B. (1952). *Charlottes' web*. New York, NY: Harper & Row
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ball. Undoubtedly, teachers are already using literature in their classrooms that, like these three books, lends itself to thoughtful connections to place and creating identity. The difference here is that we recommend that teachers *intentionally* use literature to explore place and identity. Table 2 provides suggestions which can be used to facilitate place-based connections as well as engage the reader in weaving understandings of similarities and differences of people in an interconnected world.

Ultimately, use of curriculum empowers or disempowers the reader to find relevancy in text through making personal connections, particularly to place. On the one hand, schools “work against the isolation of schooling’s discourse” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 620) by promoting connections between readers and their communities. On the other hand, by fully giving over the classroom to school-centric curriculum, schools marginalize the rural reader. When students are guided to interweave their community with text, not only is the relevance of text increased, but so is the relevance of community. Reading, then, becomes a vehicle for students to better understand themselves as rural readers and as empowered members of their rural community. Thus, to avoid allowing the commercial reading curriculum to isolate rural readers from their surroundings, teachers can use making connections as a tool for weaving together school and community.

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The teachers were the ones guiding students to make place-based connections. Teachers should model how their rural community links to what they are reading. I do think this article may have a slight bias to it, as the authors seemed to speculate the answer before going in and observing. I think it would be interesting for them to interview schools like Texas where common core wasn't implemented into schools and see if they are having the same observations in those literacy classes. 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. Advertisements. Rural Elementary Teachers and Place-Based Connections to Text During Reading Instruction. Rachael Waller, Shelby J. Barrentine. 2015.