

PLACE-BASED EDUCATION, STUDENT WRITING, AND CULTURAL  
CONTEXTS: A CASE STUDY OF BUILDING COMMUNITY CONSCIOUSNESS IN  
A RURAL MIDDLE SCHOOL CLASSROOM

by

Erin Donovan

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Approved by:

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Dr. Maryann Mraz

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Dr. D. Bruce Taylor

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Dr. Bob Rickelman

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Dr. Kelly Anderson

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## ABSTRACT

ERIN DONOVAN. Place-based education, student writing, and cultural contexts: A case study of building community consciousness in a rural middle school classroom. (Under the direction of DR. MARYANN MRAZ)

The idea of place extends beyond just the location where people live. Place is a narrative, a story that involves interactions, characters, conflicts, and the rise and flow of humanity. By understanding the importance of place and the connection to the places from which people originate, the people, their motivations, and their strengths and weaknesses begin to take a shape that inspires transformational ideas and actions. The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of place-based educational practices on rural middle school students' identities and their cultural connections as shown through student writing. This study follows the critical pedagogy of place theoretical framework and works to support the best practices in rural education research. A qualitative case study design was used to conduct this study over eight weeks during the winter of 2014. This study took place in a middle school classroom of 25 students where a collaborative relationship was created between teacher and researcher. The school was located in rural North Carolina. Data sources included interviews, observations, and a collection of student writing. The data was analyzed through thematic and content analysis to better understand the influence of place-based writing practices on student identity and cultural connections as evidenced in their writing.

## DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to the students and teacher in a small Southern town who shared their voices with me. It is also dedicated to my grandmother, Dr. Vera Murphey, whose voice helped me share my own.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“I am from a small town in a big world.”

Nando, 7<sup>th</sup> grader

### Overview

The idea of place extends beyond just the location where people live. Place is a narrative, a story that involves interactions, characters, conflicts, and the rise and flow of humanity (Azano, 2011). By understanding the importance of place and the connection to the places from which people originate, the people, their motivations, and their strengths and weaknesses begin to take a shape that inspires transformational ideas and actions (Gruenewald, 2007). Dewey (1897) wrote “the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child’s powers by the demands of the social situation in which he finds himself.” In order to educate humanity, one must first understand the places from which they originate (Ross, 2003).

Too often modern school experiences are divorced from the real world (Azano, 2011). With the increasing move to standardize curriculum and evaluate students via data-based, high stakes assessments, authenticity is lost (Esposito, 2012; Haas, 1991; Theobald, 1997). The school experience then separates itself from real life, leaving students disconnected from both the school and their real life experiences. Teachers should be encouraged to help students embrace the places that serve to characterize the students’ lives (Bishop, 2004). This would better support the idea that school curriculum,

which prompts students to engage in practices that work towards creating lasting change and commitment to communities, is more authentic and engaging (Corbett, 2009).

Schools may begin to become places of community renewal rather than the cause of community disintegration (Theobald, 2000).

The impact of schools on community development, renewal, and endurance is especially evident in rural communities (Smith & Sobel, 2010). Rural America struggles to have its voice heard and its issues counted as relevant in the ever urbanizing country (Smith, 2002). Enabling students to become advocates for their communities while developing significant ties to the places from where they come may be one solution (Howley, Theobald & Howley, 2005). This paper explores not only the importance of place but how that idea is especially relevant for rural communities throughout the country.

#### Statement of the Problem

Rural America is unique as a place. The Office of Management and Budget (2007) categorizes space in the United States as *Metropolitan*, *Micropolitan* or *Neither*. The designations are based on population density. Areas considered to be rural are in the *Neither* category. While they house only about 20% of the population, they encompass 91% of the area of the United States. Within this 91% of land, these rural areas experience varying issues, topography, and populations, which create a challenge for those seeking to enact standardized practices (Wake, 2009). For example, farmers in Nebraska have little in common with the indigenous people living in Alaskan small towns. Nor can either understand the problems associated with the isolation of an Appalachian family. Howley et al. (2005) suggested it is not the boundaries or

population count that defines an area as being rural. Rather, the idea of rural is characterized by a way of life, cultural norms and the inherent meanings that accompany a specific lifestyle.

Even within these differences, rural areas face similar circumstances that threaten both their sustainability and their future. Too often rural areas are seen as economic entities and when they are no longer profitable they are expendable (Gruenewald, 2003). For decades rural areas that once relied on agriculture as a major source of income have weakened, and the lower paying, non-agricultural jobs leave families struggling to make ends meet (Budge, 2006). Fragile community infrastructures, geographic isolation, pressures of increasing standardization, inequity of funding, limited access to resources, and rural poverty force communities to balance the need to progress with the need to protect their own community values (Azano, 2011; Gruenewald, 2003; Haas, 1991; Kelly, 2009).

Also, rural areas are facing lower population growth rates in comparison to their urban counterparts. Between 2000 and 2009, rural counties grew at a rate of 2.9% compared to 9.1% in urban counties (Gallardo, 2010). This loss was exacerbated by economic shifts that left rural areas with a scarcity of employment opportunities. First agriculture waned as a source of employment, and then industries that once maintained entire communities became outsourced to countries with lower costs of labor (Sherman, 2011; Wake, 2009). Communities had scarce choices for the employment of their children. This contributed to the increasing migration of individuals under the age of 45. This shift of youth may be due in part to *brain drain* (Sherman, 2011). Brain drain occurs when academically talented youth leave their communities of origin to seek

employment in more economically diverse areas (Smith & Sobel, 2010). Indeed those with advanced abilities and talents may feel the pressures to succeed upon leaving the community, while those who stay feel deficient in their abilities or intellect (Corbett, 2009).

Rural education struggles to maintain its identity and manage measures of standardization while it supports the surrounding populations (Kelly, 2009). Rural schools face a communal situation that is steeped in slow population growth, in mandated curriculum that does not fit the needs of its students, in the growing threat of children leaving their home communities, and in low representation in academic research (Azano, 2011; Gruenewald, 2003; Wake, 2009). Nationally, rural schools do not fit into the standardized world that large urban school districts and state legislations are supporting. Problems include per capita resource allocation, rural populations being devalued in policy discussions, procedures that require resources rural schools don't possess, and that inability to define rural education in a unified manner (Budge, 2006; Haas, 1991; Smith & Sobel, 2010).

Paradoxically, rural schools themselves remain the centers of many of their communities and serve as the most stable entities in towns facing financial peril due to economic shifts and widespread poverty (Sherman, 2011). This puts the schools in a precarious position. On one hand it is their job to educate and provide civic leadership to their communities (Theobald, 2000). But on the other, when they do educate children, showing them their potential, those children may choose to find economic opportunities outside their communities. This situation creates tension between the schools and their

communities and questions ensue regarding the value of education (Corbett, 2009; Esposito, 2012; Sherman, 2011).

Community sustenance, however, is based on the idea of *stewardship* (Azano, 2009). The idea of stewardship uses education as a forum to teach a community to celebrate the interdependence of life, forming a sense of belonging within a group of people regardless of where they travel (Kelly, 2009). Based on this concept, it is then the position of the school to encourage students to develop their communities while developing themselves. Accordingly, once a person is part of a community, forming an attachment to it, that attachment should prompt them to advocate for and care about the community, even if they no longer reside there.

But how can rural students become stewards of their communities when they often feel no connection to them? *Alienation* implies the disassociation of the student from his or her educational and community environment. Many rural students suffer a feeling of alienation from their school environment and in turn from their community (Haas, 1991; Smith & Sobel, 2010). To counteract this, teachers may encourage students to leave their communities. This mindset contributes to the problem of brain drain. Whether students stay or choose to leave, they often struggle with their shifting identity in a community that no longer reflects their values and in which they no longer feel they are a part (Esposito, 2012; Wake, 2009).

This sense of alienation increases with the use of a standardized curriculum that does not adequately address the unique culture of the rural school. Rural students need a curriculum that comes from and is reflective of their experiences (Corbett, 2009; Theobald, 1997). Traditionally, standardized curriculum operates independently from

student context or “place” (Gruenewald, 2003; Wake, 2009) working to enforce the ideas and needs of the dominant culture while ignoring the identity of the people it is meant to serve. Rural communities, whose differences may exclude them from the dominant culture, watch their students trying on identities that may fit better with a culture of which they are not a part (Wake, 2009). Instead of trying to fit into a foreign suggestion of identity, rural students should be encouraged to find relevance in their own community through a strong connection to place (Azano, 2011). Developing a more relevant curriculum, based on the places in which the students reside, can be a classroom by classroom struggle as teachers fight to find time to develop cultural identities, connections, and competencies within their students (Frederickson, 2003; Haas, 1991).

In order to work against student alienation and help students connect to their community while moving against cultural discontinuity, students should be given opportunities to share and develop their identities (Estrada, 2011). *Social capital* refers to the idea that what students bring to school from their cultural backgrounds and home communities encompass valuable points to better understand and engage the student (Esposito, 2012). Respecting social capital allows students to better connect and appreciate the world around them while they find a comfortable place to enact their own identities (Esposito, 2012; Gruenewald, 2003).

The concept of using writing as a means to access, investigate, and celebrate social capital can be advanced in classrooms that allow students to express themselves in a way that draws upon their home values and traditional communication patterns (Smith & Sobel, 2010). However, according to the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) writing assessment of eighth graders in 2011, only 23% of rural students were



considered proficient writers. This is compared to students with 38% proficiency in suburban areas and 27% proficiency in city or urban areas. As Applebee and Langer (2006) investigated the 2004 NAEP writing tests, they found that overall students struggle with length of writing, complexity of thought, knowledge and use of genre, audience, and author's purpose. Also, teachers lack time to involve students in lengthy writing assignments. Although writing across the curriculum has increased, it has not done so by a substantial amount. Likewise, writing instruction is also getting lost because tested subjects, such as reading and math, hold greater emphasis in the school day (Applebee & Langer, 2006).

However, Esposito (2012) posited that if one develops the writer by providing authentic tasks rooted in the social capital of the student, the writing will consequentially develop. Gruenewald (2003) contended that the text students read should be experientially rooted in students' lives and practices. Moffett (1965) was an early voice of support for the idea that if the narrative voice of the writer is developed, growth becomes evident in all writing that students may do. Moreover, students' writing experiences should build from their inner world as it manifests itself in the students' outer identity. McKeogh and Genereux (2006) argued that, when analyzing the writing of children labeled as gifted, a higher sense of self and contextual understanding is apparent.

The idea of *transactionalism* builds on this idea of connection. Rosenblatt (1978) described transactionalism as the change that occurs when the reader interacts with the text. That change is evidenced through student writing. If, as Gruenewald (2003) contended, the ideal text originates from the very lives the students are living, then the connection to their lives, which is defined by the places they live, should be shown

through their writing. Writing is then essential to a student's comprehension and association with the world he or she experiences. It helps connect them to their communities, assisting them in the construction of their identities and their bonds to their own unique place (Larson, 2000). Wigginton (1991) reminded educators that just because students are *of* a culture, they do not necessarily know or understand that culture. Jacobs (2011) suggested that students need an opportunity to write authentically and meaningfully about their lives, thus demonstrating a more complete understanding of the places from which they come. This opportunity honors their voices, encourages engagement, and helps them form identities that are not dictated by standardization, which may act as a force of alienation. In other words students can use writing to testify.

#### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of place-based educational practices on rural middle school students' identities and the cultural connections as shown through student writing. This study followed the critical pedagogy of place theoretical framework (Gruenewald, 2003) and worked to support the best practices in rural education research (Howley, et al., 2005).

Placed-based education is not a novel concept. In fact there have been many large scale attempts at developing curriculum that rests heavily, if not entirely, on its tenets. Examples of such projects include Foxfire in Georgia, The Llano Grande Center in Texas, and The Montana Heritage Project (Smith & Sobel, 2010). In these initiatives, students were empowered to collect oral histories while connecting with older members of their communities. At each site students created journals which showcased their work and the culture and heritage their respective communities evidenced. The students all

enjoyed successful growth through their participation and the continual support of their communities. However, they worked outside the prescribed curriculum and standards that other classrooms had to embrace (Corbett, 2009).

The purpose of this study was to create a collaborative relationship with a rural classroom teacher in order to introduce place-based writing activities and curriculum values that better support the students' understanding of place and help them in the creation of their identities within that place. This study acted as an exploratory study to examine the development of place-based education practices in the modern classroom with the understanding that the practices of that classroom must be organized through a standards-based curriculum. This research examined the possibility of delving into place to allow for a wider understanding of curriculum, student writing, and community importance.

### Research Questions

This study sought to understand the influence place-based education practices have on student identity and community connections as evidenced in their writing over a period of eight weeks. The research is guided by the following questions:

- (1) What happens to student writing when place-based education writing practices are introduced?
- (2) What community connections become evident when students engage in writing about their community?
- (3) In what ways do place-based writing practices affect students' views of identity, community, and agency?

## Significance

This study explored the impact place-based educational practices have on student identity and cultural connections as expressed through their writing. This study is significant because it investigated rural schools as cultural centers in their communities. Rural schools are institutions within the modern education landscape and should be considered separately from their urban counterparts (Corbett, 2009). Rural education is also underrepresented in academic research (Hardre, Sullivan, & Crowson, 2009; Wake, 2009). The available research is concerned primarily with assessing students quantitatively regarding the results of standardized examinations (Howley et al., 2005). Furthermore, this study is significant because it suggested an alternate paradigm to the increasingly standardized classroom, advocating for a curriculum that is rooted in the context of the students' communities (Corbett, 2009; Theobald, 2000). This corroborated the work of critical theorists and added to the literature supporting student agency and authentic engagement (Gruenewald, 2003). The final area of significance is the investigation of student writing. This is an area of research overshadowed by other content areas (Coker & Lewis, 2008). Because of the variables involved when teaching writing and the uneven assessment practices, as well as the lack of standardized testing in this area, student writing is often diminished in importance both in the school and in the academy (Applebee & Langer, 2012). This study was designed to add to the existing work that values student writing as an identity building practice (Gee, 2002) as it extended those practices to include building connections to the community.

## Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this study was to investigate how student writing changes when the classroom shifts its attention away from standardization and towards a curriculum that values the students and the places from where they come. The primary assertion of this study was that place matters and the students themselves are the expert stakeholders whose voices, as expressed through their writing, matter. When students are invested in place, they may begin to move from a state of alienation to one of stewardship taking responsibility for their own places. A place-based curriculum is grounded in authentic tasks that advocate change and student agency. Using the theoretical lens of critical pedagogy of place, this study not only focused on the emancipatory nature of critical literacy but also worked to understand the impact and importance of place.

### Critical Theory

The school of critical theory questions relationships of power as they appear in the form of institutions and cultural norms (Lemert, 2011). Critical theorists such as Freire and Gramsci challenged the authority of those holding the power in society and advocated for the oppressed to speak for themselves, rising against the forces of oppression that seek to control them (Lemert, 2011). They argued that reform should begin with the people themselves, and it should be their needs that inform the agenda of change. From this platform critical theory extends itself into education through critical pedagogy and critical literacy.

Burbules and Berk (1999) wrote that critical pedagogy is:

an effort to work within educational institutions and other media to raise questions about inequalities of power, about the false myths of opportunity and merit for

many students, and about the way belief systems become internalized to the point where individuals and groups abandon the very aspiration to question or change their lot in life (p. 50).

In other words, critical pedagogy teaches students to question and challenge the world in which they live. It involves a curriculum and educational philosophy that is student centered and geared toward a transformative state of mind (Gruenewald, 2007). Transformative thought implies that what students do in the classroom matters and changes the community around them (Giroux & McLaren, 1992). Critical pedagogy offers counter stories to those traditionally found in textbooks and encourages a narrative that challenges students to ask “why” questions that extend beyond plot and character (Gee, 2002). Indeed, students are dared to explore impact questions that imply issues threatening the embedded power structures in their communities.

Freire and Macedo (1987) underscored this argument with the idea that students need to learn their own culture first, but they must also understand the culture of their oppressors if they are to emancipate themselves from their oppression. Learning these cultural codes while embracing the home culture supports the idea of *conscientiza*, which implies that once the oppressed have become free, they have the responsibility to change the structures and then the cultural control their oppressors possess.

However, Pierre Bourdieu (1990) suggested that institutions of education were used as measures of control to strengthen social stratification. If knowledge is constructed as it is situated within the real world, then the school is a gatekeeper of sorts, making sure only those with the correct knowledge and cultural understanding may pass into the spaces of the elite. He termed this knowledge *cultural capital* and pointed to its

unequal distribution within the social classes. It was the dominant cultures, he argued, that maintained the defining characteristics of this capital and through their control ensured that only those who aspire to learn their language may hope to join their ranks (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Lemert, 2010; Swartz, 1977).

Critical literacy describes a pedagogical approach focusing on the political, sociocultural, historical, and economic forces that affect life as they are embedded in the sources of information that surround students (Soares & Wood, 2010). The praxis, or challenge to make a change, in critical literacies revolves around investigating manifestations of power relations in texts and questioning ways which those same texts could serve people of all societal levels (Avila & Pandya, 2012). Freire and Macedo (1987) emphasized the connection of the word and the world. In order to understand the true impact of words, one must first understand the cultural context of the world surrounding the word. Building on this understanding, critical literacy allows the students to work within an environment where they question, pose problems, evaluate and critique the world around them while connecting it to the words they write and read.

#### Critical Pedagogy of Place

Drawing on the work of critical theorists, critical pedagogy of place as forwarded by Gruenewald (2003) focuses on the context that surrounds students and argues that it is within this context that students must immerse themselves, to understand forces of oppression and learn how they can enact praxis in their own communities (Gruenewald, 2003; Theobald, 2000). The two major goals of this critical lens are to link the school to the community and to help students understand their agency and responsibility within both their schools and their communities. Critical pedagogy of place begins with the

understanding that people cannot exist without a cultural context. They draw their identity, either positively or negatively, from their surrounding environments and the institutions that exist therein (Freire, 1970; Gruenewald, 2003; Wake, 2009). Identity making activities should be focused and informed by their surrounding context, because if students are to understand themselves, they must first understand the impact of the place from where they come (Giroux & McLaren, 1992).

Critical pedagogy of place is important because students should become aware of the impact they can have as members of their community. Students should work to connect the ecological, economic, political, historical, and social issues that have made them who they are and continue to form the world around them (Gruenewald, 2002; Gruenewald, 2007; Kelly, 2009). Critical pedagogy of place also challenges assumptions and practices that are often taken for granted and focuses students on those aspects of society that directly impact and relate to them. Gruenewald (2003) called this process of unlearning the assumptions of the dominant culture and learning instead a curriculum that more directly relates to students *decolonization*. In the decolonization process students and teachers move away from a standardized curriculum that often doesn't fit their needs and work toward creating space for learning that is more authentic to the students' needs shaped by the unique spaces they occupy.

Critical pedagogy of place provides a lens that not only questions the condition of the oppressed but also seeks to promote an association between the individual and their surrounding community. It extends its narrative beyond oppression and embraces the idea of interconnectivity and human context. Embedded in its philosophy is also the understanding that what people *do* matters, and it is the responsibility of each member of



a community to employ a mindset of stewardship that positively works toward the idea of promoting the greater good (Azano, 2011; Gruenewald, 2003).

### Definition of Terms

#### Brain Drain

*Brain drain* is the term which signifies the loss of talent, impacting the idea of community stewardship and effecting overall community growth (Sherman & Sage, 2010). When young people leave their home communities, an aging population remains that increases stress on the health care system, in many cases creates a fixed income community, and may also be characterized by a population that turns away from plans of modernization or community renewal (Malhoit, 2005).

#### Critical Pedagogy of Place

Developed by Gruenewald (2003), this framework combines the work of critical theorists such as Paolo Freire (1970) and the idea of place-based education. It directs educators to create a curriculum that more closely resembles the needs and identities of a place rather than accept standardization. It advocates a praxis that allows students to connect to their world while advocating change (Gruenewald, 2003; McLaren & Giroux, 1999).

#### Place

Place is a geographic position that is defined through similar connections to politics, economics, historical identity, and shared cultural norms. The identity of a place is both defined and recognized by the people who reside in a communal location (Gruenewald, 2007).

### Place-based education

Place-based education is a holistic educational philosophy that challenges the boundaries between school and the community (Smith & Sobel, 2010). It builds from Friere's (1970) idea of *conscientiza*, which challenges the oppressed to take actions on their own behalf and for their own people. This philosophy argues for the use of authentic, action based activities that enable students to engage in tasks that may result in communal change (Azano, 2010; Gruenewald, 2003). Its roots are in the constructivist, progressive educational traditions (Gruenewald, 2007).

### Rural

The Office of Management and Budget (2007) defined space in the United States as *Metropolitan, Micropolitan* or *Neither*. The designations are based on population density. Areas considered to be rural are in the *Neither* category. While rural areas house only about 20% of the population, they encompass 91% of the area of the United States. Rural areas also share a common mindset that extends to their goals and cultural norms (Kelly, 2009). A rural community, in fact, may be bound more by its cultural traditions than its geographic location (Howley et al., 2005).

### Stewardship

The idea of stewardship implies moving from a static position to an active stance in order to address and perhaps correct the truths of a place (Bishop, 2003). Stewardship can take many forms including writing letters, addressing community bodies, taking care of environmental problems, working to address historical inaccuracies, fixing economic inequities, or providing space for dialogue. Although it may originate in the school

environment, it extends to the community at large and may occur with no school influence (Theobald, 2000).

### Transactionalism

Transactionalism implies a connection between a reader and a text. Rosenblatt (1978) explained that transactionalism, a change that takes place in a reader as they make meaning from text, is evidenced in student-created writing. It is in this writing that the significance of the reader's experience and how he or she has changed is constructed. For the purposes of this study, the idea of text is extended to include student life experiences (Gruenewald, 2003).

### Voice

Voice is a variable, dynamic concept that can extend to writing style, authorship, language, or speech. It is constructed both on the individual and social levels. Voice can be taught and used as a lens to understand and communicate with one's context (Sperling & Appleman, 2011).

### Conclusion

The places which inform our contextual understandings matter. Based on the context of our surroundings, we, as individuals, learn, grow, and become. When we write from what we know, we are more apt to employ a meaningful voice because what we are writing matters to us (Ross, 2003). This study addressed the need to support and find connections between unique students, their voices, and their communities. This connection matters. When students do not feel connected to their community, they have no reason to stay and certainly no reason to advocate for an area they were once from (Esposito, 2012; Smith & Sobel, 2010). The future of rural America is its students. To

ensure that future, the students themselves will have to learn that where they are from indeed matters. Place-based educational practices move the classroom toward this idea of inclusivity where place matters just as much as standards.

### Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand the influences that place-based education practices have on student identity and community connections as evidenced in student writing. Through this study students attending a rural middle school in North Carolina were exposed to activities that helped them connect to their community. Place-based education provides practices for the classroom that honor student culture while helping students build their identity while fostering community connections (Bishop, 2004). Using critical pedagogy of place (Gruenewald, 2003) as a theoretical lens, I worked with a cooperating teacher to appraise the impact of place-based education practices on student writing through an analysis using a combined methodology of content and thematic analysis.

Chapter One defines the purpose, provides background, presents significance, introduces the theoretical framework, and establishes the basic premise of this study. Chapter Two provides a context of the research concerning rural communities, education, and rural students. The definition, history, and effectiveness of place-based education are also reviewed. Student writing and the ability to express connection to text through a transactional approach to literature are linked through literature concerning the definition of transactionalism and its use in the classroom. Chapter Three addresses the methodology of the study. It contains a research plan, describes the sample and the

setting, and discusses data collection and analysis while addressing ethical issues, and the validity and reliability of the study.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

“I am from the short and the loud and thick mustaches and hard working and chubby.”  
Edward, 7<sup>th</sup> grader

The purpose of this study was to understand the influence place-based education practices have on student identity and community connections as evidenced in student writing. This literature review focuses on five major areas that defined concepts, promotes an understanding of its significance, and explores theoretical applications. The first section demonstrates how the literature defines the geography, demographics, and culture of rural areas in the United States. The second section explains the history, issues, and problems facing rural educators. The third section applies the issues of rural life and education to the adolescent rural student, highlighting factors that make them unique both as students and citizens of their communities. The fourth defines place-based education and contextualized it as an appropriate strategy for rural schools, students, and teachers. The fifth explores the view of writing, the concept of student voice, and the theory of transactionalism.

### Rural Communities

Rural communities are unique in their geography, demographics, and their position in the economic, political and historical landscape of the United States. The most convenient way to define rural communities is through population density counts. The White House’s Office of Management and Budget (OMB) defines communities by

their population density. The three categories are *Metropolitan*, *Micropolitan* or *Neither*. A *Metropolitan* area contains a central core of at least 50,000 people. A *Micropolitan* area has a core of at least 10,000 people. All other areas categorized as *Neither*, have less than 10,000 people, in a central location. Rural areas, containing an urban core of less than 10,000 people are categorized as *Neither* ([www.whitehouse.gov/omb](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb), 2000). The Office of Rural Health Policy (ORHP) accepts all non-metro counties as rural and bases its calculation on the geographic isolation of an area as well as its population density. For example, the Grand Canyon area is actually located in an area the OMB designates as *Micropolitan* because of its proximity to an area of dense population, but the ORHP recognizes that the actual landmass of the canyon is indeed rural. Based on these calculations (prior to the 2010 census), approximately 20% of the population and 91% of the landmass in the United States can be considered rural ([www.hrsa.gov](http://www.hrsa.gov), 2005).

However, defining rural areas by their population density is not effective in capturing the actual characteristics of the, at times, disparate individual communities. Rural communities are unique in the issues they face as a group as well as problems they face as individual units (Hardre, Sullivan & Crowson, 2009). Rural communities can be characterized by their isolation, the importance of personal relationships and cooperation, an aversion to individual recognition and competition, and the practice of working from a subjective frame of reference that revolves around its connection to the rural setting (Burnell, 2003; DeYoung & Howley, 1992).

Since America's infancy these shared community values have conceptualized the definition of what *rural* means (Howley, 2009). Hanson (1995) suggested that farmers and small shop keepers evidenced the first signs of being a true middle class, creating a

set of ideals and values that were touted as “American” ideals (Sherman & Theobald, 2001). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a reaction to growing urbanization, immigration, and the rise of the importance of nationalism, a movement arose to protect those ideals of a rural middle class (Bowers, 1974; Theobald, 1997). However, the Great Depression, compounded by the Midwestern Dustbowl in the 1930s, spoiled the plans of the reformers and pushed many rural families to abandon their farms and move to urban centers in search of employment (Feldman, 2003; Howley, 2009). Industrialization of the farm economy, resulting in large consolidated farms controlled by corporations rather than the farmers themselves, was the final piece that destroyed the idea of a strong rural middle class (Budge, 2006; Howley, 2009).

Rural areas today are often misunderstood through outdated assumptions and misplaced beliefs (Howley, 2009; Howley, Theobald & Howley, 2005). The concept of a rural life may evoke an idealistic picture of a sunny farmhouse, a happy couple, and their well-behaved, hard-working children (Lockette, 2010). On the other hand rural areas may be labeled as havens of bigotry and backwards ideas (Bishop, 2003). But regardless of their various misnomers, rural communities face difficulties that researchers indicate are challenges to both their present situations and their chance at sustained growth (Hardre et al., 2009). The first problem is poverty. Among the 250 poorest counties in America, 244 are rural (Malhoit, 2005). Lockette (2010) pointed out seemingly small events may in fact have large impacts on small rural communities. Economic shifts, closing plants, legislation that lowers Farm Aid, or even the closing of a downtown store can not only displace workers but also disrupt life patterns. Weather, environmental



changes, and the introduction or disappearance of natural predators can also substantially threaten the security of a small town (Corbett, 2009; Lockette, 2010; Malhoit, 2005).

Slow growth is also problematic in many rural communities (Gallardo, 2010; Sherman & Sage, 2011). This may be compounded by issues of low property values, loss of talent or *brain drain*, and an aging population (Howley et al., 2005; Malhoit, 2005). The value of farmland is decreasing as the cost of farming increases. In many areas it is no longer profitable to live on the family farm, but families are often stuck in situations that force them to either sell land at a depressed cost or live on land they fight to afford each month (Malhoit, 2005). This situation encourages talented youth to leave their rural homes for better economic opportunities often located in more urban areas (Smith & Sobel, 2010). *Brain drain*, otherwise known as the loss of talent, impacts the idea of community stewardship, and effects overall growth (Sherman & Sage, 2010). When young people leave their home communities, an aging population remains which may increase stress on the health care system, create a fixed income community, and result in a population that turns away from plans of modernization or community renewal (Malhoit, 2005).

However, what rural communities *do* have is a connection to the land and a set of shared values and beliefs that revolve around the importance of place, kinship, and community (Gruenewald, 2007). This shared belief system distinguishes these communities and the study of them as unique and important to the field of research (Howley, 2009; Howley et al., 2005). These shared patterns of value are based in part on a similar community context (Corbett, 2009; Hardre et al., 2009). *Social* or *cultural capital* encompasses the idea of a collective set of norms. *Community capital* then

assumes that rural citizens are living in their communities by choice, and as such they share a common history and bond that extends to the stewardship of their community (Estrada, 2011; Malhoit, 2005). Within this community capital is a great wealth of information that lends itself towards sustenance and strength (Azano, 2011; Gruenewald, 2007; Lyson, 2002; Theobald, 2002).

However the idea of community capital does not imply political strength. In fact what rural communities have in identity they lack in representation and political voice (Budge, 2006; Howley, 2009). Institutionally, because of their relatively small economic power, isolation, slow growth, and aging population, the concerns of America's rural population are far from the forefront of the national political agenda (Lyson, 2002). In the university setting rural studies only receive 6% of the total academic attention (Hardre et al., 2009; Kelly 2009). Rural academic studies not only call attention to issues of paramount importance to rural communities, but they also provide a voice to those silenced by the consequences of their geographic location (Gruenewald, 2007).

### Rural Education

Rural schools occupy a unique space in the American cultural landscape (Hardre, Sullivan & Crowson, 2009). They are too often characterized as economic entities whose failings overshadow the resources they possess. Researchers should instead focus on the characteristics of rural schools and their surrounding communities which impact the identities, attitudes, development, and motivation of their people and ultimately demonstrate what schools mean to their communities (Gruenewald, 2007; Lyson, 2002). It is through this renewed focus that the influence of place can be better understood and

used to motivate students to become engaged within the school environment and the community (Corbett, 2009).

Rural schools must then be sensitive to local differences as they work to attend to the standardization required by state agencies of education (Howley, et al., 2005). In 1946 C. Wright Mills, a sociologist, professor at Columbia University, and prolific writer, found the smaller the community, the greater influence and impact the school as an institution exerted. Also, the communities with strongest institutions enjoyed higher standards of living. In these rural places where schools still are the basic social and cultural centers, they remain a symbol of autonomy, vitality, and tradition (Lyson, 2002).

The problems of the rural system of education are heavily intertwined with those of their surrounding communities (Howley, 2009). Overall rural education is characterized by small, and at times, isolated schools (Malhoit, 2005) that are bound by standards not representative of their needs (Theobald, 1991) but whose schools bind together the people of the communities and serve as central locations of entertainment, value attainment, pride, and employment (Lyson, 2002; Pitzel, et al., 2007).

### Demographics

A quarter of all schools in the United States are classified as rural (United States Accountability Office, 2004). Nationally, over 9.6 million American students are considered to be living in rural areas. This constitutes approximately 20% of all student enrollment, and 9.8% of these students live in poverty. As a collective, they deal with issues of language (the Hispanic population in rural areas has grown by 150% since 2000), issues of movement (one in eight have moved in the past 12 months), and issues common to minority populations (one in four rural children is a child of color)

(Strange, Johnson & Showalter, 2012; Lockette, 2010). More important, because of the small student populations and the manner in which data is disaggregated by race and socioeconomic status, the impact of one student's standardized scores is much greater in small rural schools than in their larger urban counterparts (Powell, Higgins, Aran, & Freed, 2009).

Because this study took place in a rural school in North Carolina and knowing that each rural area has unique circumstances, one must understand the state of education and demographics for the focus state. Over half of North Carolina's public schools serve rural students, approximately 680,000 students. While their rural school districts are some of the largest in the nation, their instructional expenditures are among the lowest. Thirty-one percent of their rural students are considered to be living in poverty, 40.5% are labeled minority, and of those 6.5% are considered English Language Learners, one of the highest percentages in the country (Strange et al., 2012).

Demographics reveal that students in rural areas face some of the same issues encountered by their urban peers (Kelly, 2009). Crime, poverty, discrimination, and silencing all are part of a rural student's life (Kushman, 2001). The schools that seek to serve them are underfunded, only receiving 20% of state funding that is often poorly divided and unevenly accessed (Strange et al., 2012). In order to receive this funding, they must often adhere to standards that are not considered best practices for their students (Howley, 2009). An example of this difficulty is the implementation of the Common Core State Standards. In many districts schools lack the personnel needed to train their teachers on the new standards. As administrators try to serve the needs of their disparate populations, which may include a growing number of English Language

Learners, initiatives such as the Common Core State Standards often take the backseat to more pressing issues that directly relate to testing (Avila & Pandya, 2013; Cebollos, 2012).

Rural education cannot be defined by a singular image, rather it is a complex voice that will not be silenced as the nation advances into the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Strange, et al., 2012). Schools in rural areas may not receive as much press as those in urban areas, but their needs are no less real (Henning, 2007). Similar to their urban mates, teachers, administrators, and policy makers must often choose between what is right for the school and what is right for the student (Feldman, 2003).

## History

The history of modern rural education really begins in the 1900s with the Progressive Era (Bowers, 1974; Feldman, 2003). Prior to that time, one room school houses unevenly distributed whatever curriculum happened to be available and accessible to the teacher. The teachers' training at best might be described as sporadic and their roles were more of overseer than instructor (Shannon, 1990; Sherman & Theobald, 2001). During the Progressive Era institutions in general became modernized and standardized. Among those institutions were rural schools. Progressive thought responded to mass immigration, urban population growth, trade unions, and the move towards rural depopulation (Feldman 2003; Sherman & Theobald, 2001), and schools served as institutions used to transmit social roles and ensure class separation (Shannon, 1990; Swartz, 1977).

The Country Life Movement was a reaction to all of these issues but particularly worked to address rural depopulation (Bowers, 1974; Sherman & Theobald, 2001). The

Country Life Movement began with Theodore Roosevelt's Country Life Commission in 1908. Commissioners toured American rural areas and conducted town meetings trying to define the major problems. Their findings were overwhelming, attending to such issues as road construction, failing town infrastructure, and of course schools. Their solutions primarily focused on the schools. They envisioned building a strong Anglo-Saxon community of youth who would care for their crumbling communities. The committee supposed that if students understood the history of and current issues associated with their communities, they would have a greater desire to stay and care for their home communities (Bowers, 1974). From this train of thought, developed the idea of a standardized curriculum, known as *one best system* that would bind American schools, most of which were rural, into a common educational tradition working to benefit the whole (Sherman & Theobald, 2001).

This idea of standardization continued into the 1950s. Rural schools were judged against their urban counterparts under an expectation that all schools would conform to a single image of what schools should be (DeYoung & Howley, 1992). Along with curriculum came a standardized vision of what a school's population should look like in terms of size. James Brown Conant (1959), a chemist, president of Harvard, and an early member of the National Defense Research Committee, was a sharp critic of the American system of education. He determined that small schools did not work and in fact reduced the overall cost effectiveness of a school system. His ideas were widely received and soon the idea of rural school consolidation became a movement of rising importance (Bard, Gardener & Wieland, 2006; Conant, 1959).

School consolidation can best be defined as “the merging of two or more attendance areas to form a larger school” (Bard et al., 2006 pg. 41). It occurs when there is any reorganization resulting in a decrease in the numbers of schools or so-called *unification practices* (Bard et al., 2006; Lyson, 2002; Theobald, 1997). Proponents claim that school consolidation exercises economies of scale, increases the effectiveness of school bureaucracy, and lessens the effects of the individual teachers as they may stray from the standardized *one best system* model (Tyack, 1999). Opponents claim that consolidation results in higher transportation costs and causes students to spend more time on the school bus than they do in the classroom (Bard et al., 2006). They also suggest that students are less likely to participate in extracurricular activities, thus increasing student alienation from the school and the community (Bard et al., 2006; Lyson, 2002). Smaller schools were found to be more effective in preventing dropouts and ensuring student graduation (Malhoit, 2005). Also, new school construction or renovation puts greater economic pressures on families through taxes or local bonds (DeYoung & Howley, 1992). Overall, opponents would argue that school consolidation is a policy less concerned with the student and more concerned with economics of schooling.

Another approach to improving rural education is known as the *community school*. The community school is a concept originally outlined by reformers such as Jane Addams and John Dewey (Mott Foundation, 1993). The concept implies a partnership between the school and the community where the school would extend itself beyond the education of youth (Hickey & Van Voorhees, 1969). The school would benefit the community and the community, in turn, would support the work of the school (Theobald,

1997). This movement was significant because it recognized the individual needs of each community, the importance of the school to community connection, as well as the ability of a school to serve the basic needs of a community (Bard et al., 2006; Hickey & Van Voorhees, 1969).

The idea of community schools adheres to best practices in rural education. Howley (2009) called on rural educators to confront the divide between school and community and by doing so allow students to see the authentic application of their knowledge. Malhoit (2005) found that rural populations are generally strong supporters of schools and welcome the interaction between the school and their daily lives. They understand the need for a trained workforce, and many look to the school as a way for their children to find economic opportunities even if it means leaving the community (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998; Howley, 2009; Ludden, 2011). Theobald (1997) argued for the idea of intellectual capital, which must be used within the community for the good of the community. However, Lyson (2002) warned there remains a dearth of research regarding the impact a rural school has on its surrounding community, so the impact of the intellectual capital of students on their community has yet to be assessed.

#### Modern Education Movements

In 1983 a widely read report, *A Nation at Risk*, was released. In response to the achievement scores of United States students as they were ranked against international students, a state of emergency was declared on the educational front (Denisco, 2013). According to the report, curriculum had softened and thus a back to basics approach was needed to help students succeed (Feldman, 2003). Students required more standardized testing which emphasized and assessed these basic skills in order to help students truly



compete in the international market place (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1984). Rife with language more appropriate to the Cold War than a classroom, this loss of skills was compared to the disarmament of the nation's greatest asset, its children (Feldman, 2003). This report further strengthened the idea of the one best system as it sought to create a national model of what education should look like, defining what every student should be able to do by the time they graduate from high school (Kannapel, 2000). Written at a time when farming was facing a national crisis and rural schools were fighting against consolidation, it emphasized a system that decidedly did not include best practices for rural schools (DeYoung & Howell, 1997; Feldman, 2003).

At the start of the following decade, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) took many of the suggestions of the report and made them into law, tying funding, position security for teachers and administrators, and students' academic careers to its tenants (Powell et al., 2009). Passed in 2001, its written intent was to raise classroom rigor and expectations while tying the entire country to standardized expectations (Jackson & Gaudet, 2010). However, the end results required teachers to focus more of their energy toward ensuring that students had the skills to pass the test rather than the skills they needed to develop creativity, critical thinking skills, and writing abilities (Plank & Condliff, 2013; Winter, 2002). For the rural school it restricted funding, ignored student cultural capital, assumed that every student arrived to take the test with the same abilities and level of understanding, and most importantly mandated that the tested subjects, reading and math, receive the majority of attention in the classroom, leaving untested subjects like writing to suffer from lack of instruction (Powell et al., 2009; Winter 2002).

Powell et al. (2009) surveyed rural principals and teachers regarding the effectiveness of NCLB. Principals complained there was little consistency in teacher preparation or required programs and reported many of their schools lacked funding or resources, especially technology, to fully implement many of the programs mandated by the state and federal government. Teachers lamented the idea that content areas such as writing, science, and social studies were not getting enough attention in their classrooms, as they were not tested subjects. They also noted the amount of testing was egregious. Another complaint was the nature of their job had changed (Cohen & Allen, 2013). Teachers' roles and accountability changed. Many teachers claimed the high stakes nature of the tests changed the focus of the classroom to emphasize the importance of testing (Plank & Condliff, 2013).

In 2004 two studies were conducted by the Center for the Education of Diverse Populations (CESDP) and by the Rural School and Community Trust (RSCT). The studies looked at teaching conditions in rural schools using New Mexico as a case study. They found four areas of concern evolving from the impacts of NCLB. Teacher retention and recruitment had been greatly affected as teachers, especially those new to the field, were hesitant to teach in rural schools where test scores were low. Second, the funding formula, as set in place by NCLB, unfairly penalized schools that were the greatest in need, harming their chances to getting the resources most necessary for their success. Next, NCLB ignored curriculum that was most culturally relevant to students, thus increasing their alienation from school and decreasing their motivation to participate in school sponsored activities. Finally, the report suggested the need to establish stronger partnerships among the community, parents, and schools to ensure student success and

cultural relevancy of the school while promoting partnerships that allowed school to become a real part of community life (Pitzel et al., 2007).

The newest national initiative for standardization is known as the Common Core State Standards. Similar to its predecessors, it works towards a one best system (Stewart & Varner, 2012). The initiative was introduced by the National Governor's Association and created a curriculum that is transferable and assessed nationally rather than state to state. The written goals include language that supports an increase in standardization and accountability while preparing students to be "college ready" (Avila & Moore, 2012). The common practices of this initiative seek to codify teaching so that a student may receive a similar education regardless of the state in which they reside (Cebollos, 2012). Opponents of the Common Core suggested it is another measure designed to standardize education while de-professionalizing the role of the teacher (Avila & Moore, 2012; Robb, 2013).

Critical inquiry and differentiation are best practices that may be difficult to accommodate within standardized education (Avila & Moore, 2012). Standardized education, coupled with high stakes testing, has been shown to "push down" information so that children are expected to learn more at an earlier age, which some critics claim is not developmentally appropriate (Robinson, McKenna & Conradi, 2012). Nevertheless, the full results of the Common Core in the classroom, as well as in American education system as a whole, are yet to be seen as the standards are only in their infancy and there is great difference from state to state in the level of their acceptance and implementation. However, when the overall focus of the researcher and the educator is on standardization, the influence *place* has on students and communities is neglected. Theobald (2000)

suggested that students learn best when they are solving authentic tasks and working with themes that relate to their context. It is indeed significant to realize that students should work beyond the limits of their textbooks and teachers should challenge the conformity that is often assumed by standardized testing (Azano, 2011; Wake, 2009). By supporting rural education through research, place-based education can be better utilized to encourage connection and advocacy for local communities (Corbett, 2009; Kelly, 2009). Sustainability for rural communities may then have a strong resonance within the walls of the classroom and the curriculum of place.

### Rural Education Studies

The history of rural education studies is hardly formalized. Until 1995 the only research was completed by scattered individual academics (Kannaple, 2000). As of 2009 only six percent of all research in the field of education concerned rural education (Hardre et al., 2009; Kelly, 2009). In 1995 the Annenburg Rural Challenge was formed and through its efforts the Rural School and Community Trust was founded (Kannaple, 2000). Its mission is "to enlarge student learning and improve community life by strengthening relationships between rural schools and communities and engaging students in community-based public work" (Rural School and Community Trust, 2000). The organization divides current researchers into two categories, the rural educators and rural social scientists. Both share a common commitment to schools and communities, but their work remains divided. The trust calls for collaboration and partnerships between the two schools of research as it looks to future and more impactful and wider reaching research (Kannaple, 2000).

## The Rural Student

Rural students face a distinctive set of circumstances that set them apart from their urban peers (Burnell, 2003). They deal with issues of migration, poverty, community pressures, and expectations that differ not only from urban students but vary from location to location (Hardre et al., 2009; Sherman & Sage, 2011). As they mirror the ideals of their communities and their schools, the idea of standardization, when used to describe their situation, does little to encompass the entirety of their situation (Sherman & Sage, 2011). Their numbers are growing, due in part, to a rise in Hispanic enrollment, but their test scores lag behind urban and suburban peers (Strange et al., 2012). The children of these school districts would benefit from individualized educational practices that best suit their needs and help them succeed while learning to form connections to their school and greater community.

### Academic Achievement

The National Assessment of Education or Educational Progress is an exam given to 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> graders. Its legacy reaches back to the 1960s, and it seeks to represent a non-commercial view of the achievement of American children (McQuillan, 1998). Although it cannot capture an individual student's growth as he or she moves through the grade levels, this test presents a reliable sample of students because it is not voluntary and thus represents a true range of students (McQuillan, 1998). Results are reported at three levels of achievement: basic, proficient, and advanced. Eighth and 12<sup>th</sup> graders are expected to perform at the proficient or advanced levels (Blanton, Taylor & Wood, 2007). The 2012 *Why Rural Matters* report (Strange et al., 2012) used data from the

NAEP to characterize the state of the literacy achievement of the rural student in America.

Nationally, on the writing section of NAEP, rural students ranked above urban (city) students with a score of 150 compared to 147, but they trailed their suburban counterparts who scored 154. However when looking at North Carolina specifically, urban students outscored the rural students, with an average score of 150, compared to the rural students' score of 147. They were both behind the suburban students who scored 151. On the 2007 test 13% of North Carolina students were below basic, 57% scored at the basic level, 29% of writers were proficient, and 2% were advanced. These score have not varied significantly since the 1998 test (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

#### Brain Drain

Rural students must also contend with communities that may not offer economic opportunities that create sustainable futures (Sherman & Sage, 2011). Rural students are more likely to leave their home communities at higher rates than urban students (Gallardo, 2010). Indeed, it is often the goal of education programs to prepare students so they can leave and become “successes” in the larger world (Corbett, 2009). Often migration, rather than economic accomplishment, marks a student as having achieved success. However, as holds with urban students, often the students whose parents have greater socioeconomic status are those encouraged to pursue higher education and opportunities outside their home communities (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). Parental expectations may influence children to leave the community, instilling in them lack of

interest in pursuing opportunities to stay in their home community or being concerned about issues of community sustainability.

The students who stay behind may be stereotyped as having lack of initiative, talent, or ability (Corbett, 2009; Sherman & Sage, 2011). They may face conflicting messages about their choice to stay in their home communities and may develop attitudes toward education in general that are not overly supportive (Hardre et al., 2009). Both groups must contend with issues of low aspirations as even those who leave the community to attend institutions of higher learning have a greater chance of dropping out than urban students (Burnell, 2003). Both groups struggle with motivation based on their individual needs as community expectations often surpass or too heavily influence the choices the students make (Hardre et al., 2009).

#### Adolescence

Because this study assesses the writing, cultural connections, and identity of middle school students, it is important to understand the distinctive context of an adolescent. The adolescent is often misunderstood. They are stereotyped as a group, but their motivations, behaviors, and identities actually vary greatly due to their gender, race, ethnicity, and social class (Bean & Harper, 2012). Institutionally, adolescence is marked as the time period between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> year or the grade levels of 5<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup>. It is discernible through coming of age, pubescent development, relationships with peers, and the concept of age itself. Foremost, it is a period of transition between the role of a child and the responsibilities of an adult (Alexander & Fox, 2010; Bean & Harper, 2012). One might note it is very often the aggregate that gains the most attention in the news and

in popular culture and that one in four adolescents does exhibit at-risk behaviors (Hersch, 1999).

The idea of adolescence is actually a modern construct (Alexander & Fox, 2010). Lesko (2012) illustrated how the idea of the adolescent developed as a political and economic development. Stanley Hall (1904), a psychologist and social Darwinist in the Progressive Era, wrote about the distress of the adolescent brain (Epstein, 2007; Lesko, 2012). Originating many of the stereotypes that remain points of adolescent characterization, Hall considered adolescents as people who were adrift and constantly challenged by their environment, which was filled with distractions and dangers. He saw adolescence as the line between primitive and evolved human nature (Lesko, 2012). While much of his work might be dismissed as overly reliant on outdated ideas and not scientifically attuned, his lasting impact can be seen regarding his explanation of the importance of context (Youniss, 2005). Context matters to the adolescent, and the idea that the adolescent is impacted and developed through the ideas and cultural norms of his or her world can be particularly seen in the rural adolescent.

Adolescents growing up in rural communities are an intricate part of those communities' social networks. Ludden (2011) wrote about the importance of social networks and civic involvement. Ludden claimed that civic development is a key component to the overall development for these children. Additionally, in rural spaces interconnectedness between multiple institutions may become a positive or negative component in these adolescents' lives. For example, if an adolescent is labeled as a "trouble maker" at school that label may follow him or her to church, and/or to his or her



afterschool job. Thus the sense of alienation he or she feels in one place may carry over to another (Corbett, 2009).

### Place-based Education

Dewey (1938) wrote “that education, in order to accomplish its end both for the individual learner and for society must be based upon experience” (p. 89). He urged educators to resist standardization and emphasized the organic connection between education and personal experience. He argued it was the position of the school house to help codify and shape these experiences so they better conform to the expectations of the curriculum. Place-based education practices support Dewey’s ideas as at their core is the understanding that the student matters and so does the world in which he or she lives.

### Place-based Education as a Practice

Place as a concept is defined through all contextual happenings and the interactions of place makers (Gruenewald, 2007). The idea of place is dynamic and opens a window to cultural norms and practices of the people it houses (Theobald, 1997).

Sobel (2004) wrote:

Place-based education is the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science and other subjects across the curriculum. Emphasizing hands-on, real-world learning experiences, this approach to education increases the academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students’ appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens (pg. 7).

Place-based education is not a curriculum but is a philosophy rooted in the vibrant aspects of place (Anazo, 2011). It focuses on the local experience as it encompasses issues surrounding the history, culture, economy, politics, and environmental world of the community. Also, it investigates the condition of the individual as he or she relates to and connects with their surrounding contextual concerns (Gruenewald, 2007). Place-based education breaks down the walls between the school house and the community (Smith & Sobel, 2010) while working to support student voices as they learn to express themselves through authentic practices that serve a greater need than just “getting a good grade” (Bishop, 2003, Esposito, 2012). Students are able to become real time participants as they create knowledge rather than simply observe the data that is given to them (Smith & Sobel, 2010). This authentic knowledge fosters connection and indeed leads to a greater commitment to the communities in which students reside (Lundahl, 2011). This connection may work against student alienation and foster stewardship (Azano, 2011).

Place-based education is rooted in the best practices of culturally responsive education (Neito, 2002). Culturally responsive education advocates a sense of ownership and responsibility, provides space for authentic interdisciplinary projects, and uses standards as tools to guide curriculum but not dictate practice (Perea, 2011). Critically responsive education works to support the cultural capital students bring to school and allows space for them to act as co-creators of knowledge (Corbett, 2009; Theobald, 1997). By fostering connection while respecting the cultural capital students inherently bring into the classroom, culturally responsive education works to engage students where

they are rather than promoting the idea that students need to leave their communities to gain success (Epply & Corbett, 2012; Gruenewald, 2007).

## History

It might be argued that place-based education began with Dewey's sentiments regarding the importance of real life connections adding to the significance of the school experience (Dewey, 1938). Traces of place-based educational practices were seen in France in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when children compiled information about their villages and sent them to other villagers completing the same experiment (Cummings & Sayers, 1995). In the 1970s a project in Georgia, Foxfire, encouraged and published student writing. Students learned to be cultural journalists, anthropologists, and historians (Smith & Sobel, 2010; Wigginton, 1991). The initial project developed training institutes that spread across the country, encouraging educators to help students collect oral histories, honoring and fostering connections to their home communities. In the 1980s the journal *Kamai* was published by Alaskan students. It focused on Alaskan native cultural practices and similar to Foxfire spread throughout the surrounding communities, influencing a number of students and teachers as well as gaining national merit (Smith & Sobel, 2010).

In the 1990s the Annenburg Rural Challenge did much to help rural students as well as capture some of the best practices occurring around the country (Smith & Sobel, 2010) Francisco Guarjardo (2006) returned to the rural community in which he grew up to teach. Disappointed with the curriculum he was given, he decided to teach his students, building upon one primary piece of curriculum based on their shared communal

space. His students began to interview any interested member of the community. When they analyzed their interviews, they discovered the interviews all contained shared community assets. As his students continued to interview and develop their lists those assets were used to build a curriculum (Smith, 2002). Across the country, but particularly in rural areas, teachers and administrators are using these projects as guides to spark their own students' interest in the areas in which they live.

### Effectiveness

Place-based education practices work because they help students acquire the standardized concepts and content through authentic problem solving activities and active learning practices, which revolve around what they know best: their own world, families, schools, and cultural patterns (Corbett, 2009; Gruenewald, 2007; Theobald, 2000).

Place-based education also teaches students to value the significance of every place, thus supporting the idea that if where they live is important then so are they (Gruenewald, 2007; Pitzel et al., 2007). Bishop (2004) wrote:

If students are allowed to learn how to care about a place and to care for it, they are more likely to consider living there and helping to solve its problems. A pride of place will also give them the necessary skills to live well in any community.

Place-based learning, wherever that place is, teaches a sense of community and gives students a model for living well anywhere (p. 68).

Sobel (2005), an advocate for place-based education, suggested these practices may bring education back to the neighborhood, help students connect with adult mentors, and connect teachers and students with the community by teaching them to embrace its environmental, political, historical, and cultural realities. It also may encourage

community members to take a more active and protective stance towards their own schools. Students may learn skills that can transfer wherever they may choose to live as they advocate for the value of the place that was their childhood home (Bishop, 2004; Henning, 2007). Another result may be the empowering of teachers. Feldman (2003) demonstrated that when teachers design their own curriculum around their own communities, they have more control and bring more ownership into their respective classrooms. Largely, place-based education is flexible enough to adapt to each different location in which it is used while also overcoming the disjuncture that may exist between the students and their school by creating real meaning for students around issues that actually matter to them and their communities (Kannaple, 2000; Lockette, 2010; Smith, 2002).

Place-based education practices hold much promise in rural communities, but the research on their effectiveness is in its infancy. There are no studies regarding its effectiveness in North Carolina, and most existing studies involve high school and elementary students. The middle school adolescent has been shown to have distinctive characteristics that warrant research originating from their situation (Lesko, 2002). Also, existing studies do not consider the change in student writing both in quality and content as it is impacted by place-based education writing practices. This study worked to address rural adolescents through their writing as they responded to place-based education writing practices.

### Writing

Student writing can serve as evidence of identity building, author's voice, and cultural practices (Jacobs, 2011). It is a powerful tool often misunderstood, mis-taught,

and forgotten in a curriculum that more fully serves the needs of more heavily tested subjects such as math and reading (Bean & Harper, 2012; Murray, 1968). However, by using place-based education practices as a starting point for engaging student writers, their communication skills may be strengthened and their sense of alienation may be ameliorated (Esposito, 2012).

### Issues with Student Writing

The majority of American students can be considered struggling writers. NAEP described writing in three levels of achievement: basic, proficient, and advanced. Eighth grade students are expected to be proficient. To be considered proficient an eighth grade writer:

Must be able to develop responses that clearly accomplish their communicative purposes. Their texts should be coherent and well structured. Voice should be relevant to the tasks and support communicative effectiveness. Words and phrases should be chosen thoughtfully and used in ways that contribute to communicative effectiveness. Solid knowledge of spelling, grammar, usage, capitalization, and punctuation should be evident throughout the texts (NAEP, 2011).

Nationally, only 27% of urban eighth grade writers are considered proficient. Only 23% of rural writers are proficient (NAEP, 2011). When analyzing the results of the NAEP test, Applebee and Langer (2012) found student writers lacked the ability to write long texts, misunderstood author's purpose and genre, and did not write in a manner that showed complexity of thought. As a group, adolescents are unmotivated writers, struggling with student assigned tasks and lacking motivation and engagement in these

afore mentioned tasks (Bean & Harper, 2012). Teachers are poorly trained to teach writers and often lack the time needed to truly invest in developing the struggling writers they find in their classroom (Murray, 1968).

The *Writing Next Report* compiled in 2007 by Graham and Perin reflected the work of the much cited *Reading Next Report* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). After researchers surveyed the condition of middle and high school students, teachers, and administrators, a panel then created recommendations for the field of writing. The two major conclusions from *Writing Next* (2007) suggested that explicit and systematic instruction should be part of any writing instruction. Adolescents should learn the process of and reasons for writing. The other suggestion was to provide scaffolding opportunities for students. For example, they advocated peer collaboration, real world goals, and writing activities that help students develop, organize, and evaluate ideas for their writing. They also explained the power of using mentor texts, enabling teachers to show students how “good” writing looks.

Graham and Perin (2007) also focused their attention on what skilled writing teachers do. They found effective teachers had time dedicated to writing and that writing was done for authentic purposes across the curriculum. In other words purposeful writing happened in every classroom. They also exposed students to various forms of genre while helping them develop proficiency in each. They kept students engaged by providing writing activities that were thoughtful and connected to larger goals in the curriculum rather than disparate writing tasks that do not relate to classroom objectives. Lastly, they adapted writing assignments to the individual in order to allow real expression and flexible modes of success.

Further research in the area of student writing is warranted. Because reading is a tested subject and is more easily assessable, reading, as a research subject, has received greater funding and therefore more attention in the research field (Cocker & Lewis, 2008; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Specific areas of writing research might include contextualizing writing approaches in authentic, real world situations while providing appropriate assessment practices especially for adolescent writers (Graham & Perin, 2007). Applebee and Langer (2012) called for researchers and teachers to begin the discussion not only about the skills and knowledge students need to become better writers but also about what students need to increase their writing motivation. Sperling and Appleman (2011) also suggested further research about the idea of student voice to increase both writing proficiency and motivation for adolescent writers.

Writing research being explored in the university setting is primarily focused on issues associated with writing to learn and learning to write rather than investigating writing as a student identity building activity (Coker & Lewis, 2008). Research that is more student centered focuses much more on the research environment of the university rather than the world of the student and teacher. Writing research should focus on authentic writing practices that encourage the development of student identity and student writing voices (Giroux & McLaren, 1992; Sperling & Appleman, 2011). Graham and Perin (2007) explained that writing and reading are separate processes and that the research on reading far exceeds the research on writing. They called for a greater body of work to be completed concentrating on writing for a real audience and purpose, experimenting with genre, and developing student voice. They echoed Coker and Lewis's



(2008) suggestion that writing research should be teacher and school focused rather than developed in the university only to be enacted in the schools.

### Writing as a Discipline

Ross (2003) suggested when we write about our own lives and the people and places existing therein, writing becomes more honest and carefully constructed because it has become meaningful. Fletcher (2001), a proponent of the writing workshop philosophy, advocated having students base their writing on what they know. In particular he suggested *place* because “Place exists in the deepest parts of us. In one sense we never leave them: We soak them up, carry them around, all the various places we have known” (pg. 114). Place-based writing allows students to read their own stories and react to them, developing critical thinking skills as they choose the most relevant genre in which to express their reaction to stories and information (Bishop, 2004). These practices emphasize authenticity over automaticity.

Students should learn how to write inside the classroom with the same motivation and practices they use outside the classroom. When students write on their own time, they have an authentic audience and purpose, their form is flexible, and voice is natural (Moffett, 1965). Epply and Corbett (2012) argued that writing can be used to measure student outcomes and achievement because it can represent identity, comprehension, and conventions instead of just assessing skills that are often void of context. Paxton (2012) agreed with them on the basis that language can help reveal power relations of place. Additionally, student writing can serve to critique, understand, and respond to content, context, and text. Writing can also become a practice that demonstrates socio-cultural interactions (Street, 1984). Gruenewald (2007) and Blommaert (2005) both suggested

that context can be considered text, and as such student writing demonstrates a connection to and understanding of students' lives.

### Student Voice in Writing

When researching the idea of voice in student writing, it is useful to begin with the work of Bakhtin. Bakhtin was a Russian philosopher, literary theorist, and semiotician whose work brought together literary theory, ethics, and the philosophy of language. One of his concepts surrounding the study of language was *heteroglossia* (Bakhtin, 1981). The idea of heteroglossia is based on the impact of context. Nothing, according to Bakhtin, occurs in a vacuum. Every utterance, which Bakhtin explained is the main unit of meaning, is actually the reaction to or reflection of the surrounding context or heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1981; Cruddas, 2007). Thus utterances are not singular or monologic; rather, Bakhtin argued, they can only be understood in context or a blending of world views through language that creates a unity.

This leads to a connection between the idea of voice and cultural identity. The idea of voice may be understood as an interwoven chain of utterances (Bakhtin, 1981) and evidences the outgrowth of identity. By understanding an individual's voice is heteroglossic, it is possible to understand both context and voice and how each show signs of identity and cultural connections (Appleman & Sperling, 2011).

The examination of voice and its relationship to the power structure of the classroom is the foundation of the socio-cultural conception of education (Gee, 2008), which echoes the foundational tenants of place-based education (Gruenewald, 2007). Place-based education then underscores the importance of understanding context and power relationships as they relate to the classroom, the teacher, and the students

themselves. As part of this philosophical understanding, students develop through the free expression of their voice as they learn to become part of and reflect the changing nature of their context (Bakhtin, 1981). Thus, if student agency is restricted or standardized, their voices will not develop authentically to reflect their changing identity. DiPardo (2011) suggested that “good writing emerges from author’s interests, convictions, and personalities” (pg. 171). Jocson (2010) echoed this by connecting writing to personhood. Accordingly, writing may be an authentic way of unlocking students’ personas by developing their writers’ voices.

However, voice is a highly debated topic both in the classroom and in academic research (Cruddas, 2007). Sperling and Appleman (2011) suggested the idea of voice implies any language and literacy concepts that help the writer better communicate his or her ideas in a genuine manner. DiPardo (2011) proposed that “Voice is when writers sound like themselves. While voice may be conceptually elusive, most readers find it unmistakable.” Additionally, the National Writing Project (2011) suggested that voice can be assessed by “how effectively the writer communicates in a manner that is expressive and engaging, thereby revealing the author’s stance toward the subject. Voice is evident when a writer shows a sense of his or her personality through writing.” Elbow (2007) however proposed that the identity that seems apparent in the voice of a writer can be less of a view into who the writer is but more of a view into who the writer wants to be or the identity the writer has tried to create.

It is important to note that because voice does not occur in a space devoid of context, the effect of a teacher is tremendous and can be as positive as it can be negative (Sperling & Appleman, 2011). In the classroom a teacher may either facilitate space for

expression or can build walls of misunderstanding and silence. These missteps can not only alter student voice but diminish it entirely (Elbow, 2007). Also, voice is not a concept exclusive to the English classroom. Rather, voice is a concept that should be extended and encouraged across the curriculum as it serves as a reminder of the growing identity of students that naturally extends outside the parameters of classroom content (Elliot-Johns, et al., 2012).

Therefore, for the purposes of this study, *voice* will be defined as occurring when a writer's understanding of his or her identity is clearly communicated through his or her chosen genre which allows clear enunciation of beliefs and values while drawing upon the cultural capital of the writer.

#### Transactionalism

Transactionalism is a literary approach that embraces all responses as valid and important (O'Flahavan & Wallis, 2005). Transactionalism as described by Louise Rosenblatt (1978) occurs through dialogic interaction between the reader and the text. In other words, because there is no clear delineation between the text and the reader, neither one has more importance than the other. The meaning derived from one and contextualized by the other is dynamic and may be revisited and changed at any point (Lewis, 1999; O'Flahavan & Wallis, 2005; Rosenblatt, 1995). It is the interaction that holds meaning rather than the importance of the individual parts. Rosenblatt (1978) separated a reader's experience between the *effferent*, describing an analyzing relationship, and *aesthetic*, describing an experiencing relationship, but these two distinctions are really just measures of the mood or attitude of the reader and act in a dialogic relationship rather than an either/or relationship (Rosenblatt, 1978; Rosenblatt,

1995). But overall, the interactions and interpretations are reliant upon the contextual power of the reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 1978).

The interaction among the reader, the student, and their text, which for the purpose of this study entails their experiences (Gruenewald, 2003) is evidenced through writing. Rosenblatt (1978, 1995) named writing the *poem*, by which she means any product that demonstrates the meaning yielded from the reader-text interaction. This *poem* also reveals the democratic nature of the classroom, which should be open and welcoming to all voices and ideas (O'Flahavan & Wallis, 2005). Rosenblatt (2005) also suggested that through the process of transaction, the reader learns about his or her identity while also working out a relationship with the surrounding communal context. From this the reader begins to develop identity and through it may critique the *text* of their context.

The foundation of this theory is that text allows the reader to experience the life and thoughts that created the text. It provides space for the reader to access cultural capital and connect it to the text. From this the reader relates to the text and produces a piece of writing. The importance of transactionalism is that it shows the change in the reader, and the new meaning assigned to the text is unique to each reader (Rosenblatt, 1978). The analysis of text should be indicative of the identity of the student, the meaning of the text as seen through the student's experience, and the ability of the student to adequately express said meaning in a piece of original text.

#### Summary

Rural America warrants representation. While its population is a fifth of this country's total population, its landmass encompasses over 90% of America's space.

Rural communities are unique, rich cultural spaces that for too long have been ignored due to their waning economic solvency. Each distinctive community survives through its shared cultural capital and ties to the land on which its people live.

The rural school is the lifeblood of rural communities and as such carries with it a power to transform not only its students but the community itself (White & Reid, 2008). But many rural communities in America are forgotten landscapes isolated with silenced voices. Theobald (1997) called upon the people of rural communities to rest not on what was but instead to look ahead to the future, planting in their children a seed of concern for their home towns. It is through this connection between school and community that the idea of place pride and stewardship can extend to rural children, and they can take with these ideals with them wherever they plan to live (Barley & Beesley, 2007). It is the school that can instill in these children a desire to do so.

Place-based education practices rest in a legacy of authentic real world school and community connections. They work toward helping educators embrace the cultural capital of the student while allowing the student space to understand and connect to the world in which they live. Place-based education practices and the writing that serves as evidence of their influence also provide space for students to express their voices and work to build their identities.

Writing is an essential part of any well balanced education. Writing affords students the opportunity to express themselves while allowing teachers a method of assessment that works beyond simple skill and drill. Writing may also be used across the disciplines to show comprehension of and interaction with text, which adds an additional component of importance to its place in school curriculum.

The investigations surveyed in this review indicated that further research is needed in the areas of rural education, rural student achievement, place-based education, and writing. The geographic area, student age, and use of writing as a tool of identity as it evolves through transactional response to text make this study distinctive. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of place-based education on rural middle school writing as it is used to evidence identity and cultural connections.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

“I will always love where I came from.”  
-Jacquie, 7<sup>th</sup> grader

### Overview

The purpose of this study was to understand the influence place-based writing practices have on student identity building practices and community connections as evidenced in student writing. As the researcher my goal was to create a collaborative relationship with a classroom teacher in order to introduce place-based writing activities and curriculum values that better support the students’ understanding of place while they learn to express that understanding in their writing. This study acted as a pilot to question the development and impact of place-based writing practices in the modern classroom with the understanding that the practices of that classroom must be organized through a standards-based curriculum.

This study focused on the following questions:

- (1) What happens to student writing when place-based education practices are introduced?
- (2) What community connections become evident through student writing?
- (3) In what ways does place-based education affect students’ views of identity, community, and agency?



In order to answer these questions, I designed a descriptive case study to explore the bounded system of a classroom. The classroom acted as a natural setting, which allowed for the inductive description called for in such a study. As such, a qualitative case study was the most appropriate research methodology to employ (Yin, 2009). Qualitative studies approach their subjects through a comprehensive, descriptive analysis of a group or individual response (Creswell, 2009). A qualitative research design can be used in studies such as this that seek to interpret context or discover meaning (Ezzy, 2002). Inductive qualitative studies use data to build theory rather than have data prove theory. They are typically utilized to provide greater depth of knowledge in a particular situation (Merriam, 1997).

This chapter explores the design of case studies and addresses the methodology of the study. It defines and contextualizes content and thematic analysis as tools of interpretation. The chapter also explores ethical issues and researcher bias and presents the limitations of the study.

### Case Study Design

Case study design focuses on conducting an investigation within a natural environment (Yin, 2003). Case study uses a small group to study a particular phenomenon (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). Barone (2011) described this group as *bounded* because it allows for distinction between that which is included in the study and that which is not included. Thus case study implies studying one critical case to test an assumption or theory. Additionally, case studies are ideal for situations in which the researcher cannot control the behaviors being studied. Case studies rest their research on thick description to capture what happens within the bounded system (Merriam, 1997).

Merriam (1988) wrote about the four components of a traditional case study. The first is that case studies are particularistic, which indicates they center their work on a particular program, group or event. Second, case studies are descriptive in the way they present their findings. Third, they are also *heuristic*, meaning they are used to enrich understandings of a certain phenomenon. Fourth, they are *inductive*. Inductive research uses data to drive the findings of the subject rather than to using data to confirm what has been hypothesized. To conduct a quality case study there should be multiple sources of evidence, reviewed by the key informants, gathered by a credible researcher who has spent time in the field in which he or she is researching (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1994).

Because this is a descriptive case study, as Ezzy (2002) defined, I analyzed my collected data through a critical pedagogy of place, which calls for analyzing contextual details to better understand the impact of place on the student and the community at large (Gruenewald, 2003). A descriptive case study uses rich description to represent the depth of a situation. Thus, description is essential to this study. Collecting and analyzing thick description allowed me to more aptly understand the factors of student expression and how their interaction with the curriculum was reflected in their writing (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). Additionally, this study is particularistic because a single classroom was used to observe the results of place-based education on the identity building practices and community connections of a group of middle school students. This case study focused on one middle school classroom where I worked collaboratively with the teacher to introduce place-based writing practices. The findings were presented descriptively through the analysis of the multiple sources of information which included student writing, observations, my research journal, and interviews.

## Research Context

### Description of Setting

This study took place in a rural middle school located in North Carolina. The school serves 644 students compared to the district average of 758 students and the state average of 668 students for a middle school (Alamance-Burlington School System, 2012). It is considered by the state to be a school of progress, which indicates that at least 60% of its students are on grade level in reading and math proficiency. The school is a Title One school because 80% of its students receive free or reduced lunch. The designation of Title One is indicative of the level of poverty of the students. These schools receive additional funding due to the fact that a significant percentage of their student base comes from homes below a certain income level (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). Thirty-four percent of the school's students are African American, 36% are Hispanic, and 27% are White. There are approximately 1% Asian and Native American students. Nine percent of the school's population is considered gifted and 17% are labeled Exceptional Children (EC). Of its 644 students, 280 are categorized as English as a Second Language students (ESL). For the 2011-2012 school year, 53.5% of the eighth graders scored proficient on the Reading End of Grade Test. This is compared to a 63.3% average for the district and 71.1% for the state (NC Report Cards, 2012).

I chose this site because I had access to both the administration and the teachers. I worked as a first and second year teacher at this middle school and am well acquainted with the principal, who was the assistant principal when I taught there. Because I am a former teacher at this site, I am familiar with both the culture of the school and the

community. This is a school that is well sustained by its small surrounding community, which is significant because, as Esposito (2012) explained, a successful rural school is one that is supported by its community. I remember band concerts in the small auditorium, which was filled with parents and community members whose children used to be part of the successful music program. The football games were attended just as well as the high school games were. Its small Parent Teacher Association always worked hard to improve the grounds of the school with a monthly cleanup. All these efforts showed community involvement in the school.

Demographically, the school adheres to the definition of a rural school. It has a high ESL and minority population. There are issues of poverty both in the community and within the school's population. Also, the state categorizes the school's population as one that resides in a rural community, which aligns with the national definition.

### Participants

In designing this study, I worked with two sets of participants, the teacher and the students. To find a teacher who was willing to participate in the study, I worked with the principal. I explained my study and the time it would require. He suggested offering this opportunity to his social studies and language arts teachers as both areas include standards that would complement the writing practices essential to my study. He phrased his offer to the teachers as a type of professional development for teachers interested in increasing their knowledge about implementing writing practices across the curriculum as well as for those who wanted to learn how to achieve greater interaction with the community. Several teachers replied positively. I interviewed all three through email

and chose the teacher based on her experience, her willingness to introduce innovation in her classroom, her attitude toward the students, and her openness to collaborate with me.

Mrs. Richardson, a pseudonym, has been a teacher for the last thirteen years. She spent the last nine years at Main Street Middle School, also a pseudonym. She has been a language arts teacher in both the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Additionally, she served as the grade level chairperson. In that role she worked closely with the academic facilitator and the Response to Intervention specialist to help all her students but particularly those who may be in danger of not passing their end of year exams. In that way she was as a mentor to her team, helping teachers with student grouping, interventions, reading choices, book clubs, and reading strategies. She is a resident of the town where the school is located. Her husband owns a small business and her two children plan to attend Main Street Middle School. Originally she comes from a community in the mountains of North Carolina so she is well versed on the realities of rural life. She described why she chose to become a teacher in our first interview.

I started teaching years ago. I knew I always wanted to do it but I came into it kind of late in the game. But I guess I'm still here because I know I make a difference. I come to work for all those kids that no one else can teach. I do it for the kid that's gonna be lost to a gang. Hell I do it for those kids I grew up with that I know are still living in a trailer, who could have been anything they wanted to be, if someone gave them a chance.

The students I worked with were registered in a class coded as honors, although that designation did not indicate an accelerated learning status. Rather it indicated that the students were reading on grade level and possessed skills appropriate to a 7<sup>th</sup> grader.

There were 23 students in the class. The demographics of the class reflected that of the school, except for the fact that there were no labeled EC (exceptional children) students. In language arts classes at Main Street Middle School, EC students are taught in an inclusion style classroom with an additional teacher. In this way, they are receiving the additional services required by their Individual Education Plans. The students in the class are described in the tables below.

Table 1: Class demographics (Male)

Pseudonym	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Mrs. Richardson's description
Nando	Male	Hispanic	He acts very young and struggles to keep up with his class.
Edward	Male	Hispanic	He has great potential and is part of a very supportive family.
Omar	Male	Hispanic	He is very into soccer but struggles in class. Language may be a barrier.
Anthony	Male	Hispanic	He is a very energetic student and often must be redirected for off task behavior.
Caesar	Male	Hispanic	He comes from a family that has gang affiliations. He excels at school but only when he is engaged in something he is interested in.
Jose	Male	Hispanic	He is a very strong reader but a reluctant writer.
Hector	Male	Hispanic	He is a very good test taker but struggles with writing.
Nick	Male	Hispanic	He is now on grade level but had to work in 6 <sup>th</sup> grade with a specialist to overcome his language barriers.
Alex	Male	Caucasian	He is very bright but socially he struggles to fit in.
Chase	Male	Caucasian	He has a very troubled home life. This impacts his ability to be successful in the classroom.
Sam	Male	Caucasian	He struggles in school because socially he has a hard time fitting in. He often "calls out" in class which frustrates other students.
Tyrone	Male	African American	He is hard working but is hindered by a learning disability.
John	Male	African American	He is a new student to the school. He struggles in language arts.

Table 2: Class demographics (Female)

Pseudonym	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Mrs. Richardson's description
Sarah	Female	Caucasian	She is very intelligent and always wants to participate. She is a bit of a tomboy and often struggles to fit in with her classmates.
Elizabeth	Female	Hispanic	She comes from a very religious family but can be quite outspoken.
Jacque	Female	Hispanic	She is very shy but shows lots ability and creativity.
Martha	Female	Hispanic	She struggles with self-esteem issues and often is lost in class because she doesn't ask for help.
Alicia	Female	Hispanic	She arrived two weeks prior to the study. So far she is a quiet student who consistently does her homework.
Cynthia	Female	Hispanic	She is a very strong writer. She participates in many extracurricular activities.
Karen	Female	Hispanic	She struggles with language and has very remedial writing skills.
Jada	Female	African American	She struggles both with academics and behavior issues.
Jessica	Female	African American	She is a very enthusiastic writer. She talks about the book she is writing.

### Study Design

This study took place over eight weeks in their winter semester. The timing was ideal because it represented one section of their school calendar year. Since they are a year round school, breaks proceed and follow this time period so it was natural to present a new “unit of study” to students. Students were engaged in writing tasks, they listened and responded to read alouds, worked with mentor texts, and engaged in debates and interactive writing assignments. Work samples were collected every week in a student notebook. Teacher and student interviews took place throughout the eight weeks.

Additionally, I observed the classroom weekly to better understand classroom discourse and the application of the lesson plans. At times I served as a co-teacher.

In designing this study I addressed three questions. In order to answer the first question, what happens to student writing when place-based education writing practices are introduced, I collected student writing samples. The first set of samples represented work the students completed prior to this study. I also analyzed an introductory prompt that specifically related to place-based concepts. Throughout the study I then collected writing samples, interviewed students, and conducted member checks to ensure that I accurately represented what the students expressed. Question two, what community connections become evident when students engage in writing about their community, and question three, in what ways do place-based writing practices affect students' views of identity, community, and agency, are addressed through three different sources. The first data source was the students' writing and interviews. The second was the interviews with the teacher as her insight into the students' perceptions helped me understand how the students changed in the way they connected with their community. My classroom observations served as my third source. I found that watching student interactions and listening to their conversations allowed me to better understand their changing identities and their general perceptions regarding their place and agency within their community.

### Phase I: Planning

After speaking with all interested teachers, I chose one teacher with whom to work. I met with the teacher, interviewed her, and conducted a preliminary classroom observation. After reviewing the process of IRB, we worked together to plan eight weeks of instruction. We worked to ensure that while place-based ideas were central in the



weekly plans, there was still space so she could complete the necessities of the established standardized curriculum. We created a calendar, planned my observations, and established means of communication.

The lesson plans are included in Appendix B. They are based on a protocol reflecting the best practices of existing place-based projects. When planning we took into consideration suggestions provided by Smith and Sobel (2010) as they evaluated not only the history of place-based education practices but also discussed the successes and opportunities of programs around the country. We followed the lesson format required by the school and ensured that students were assessed in a manner consistent with the school's expectations.

#### Phase II: Data Collection

Data collection took into consideration four sources: classroom observations, student and teacher interviews, student writing samples, and my reflexive journals. Data was collected consistently throughout the eight week period to better show changes in student writing and attitudes.

My time in the classroom was situated on the spectrum of co-teacher to participant observer. I took an active role to better serve the collaborative environment I worked to create with my partner teacher. It was my intention to observe the overall culture of the classroom to better understand the interactions of the students with the curriculum. This offered an opportunity to better assess any changes we needed to make as we progressed. The classroom observations were videotaped as I took field notes. After each observation I reviewed the data, recording memos to add to the data.

Student and teacher interviews also served as sources of data (Fontana & Frey, 2005). The first interview with the teacher helped me understand the teacher's role in her classroom as well as her educational philosophy. Particularly, we spoke about opportunities and challenges she faced on a daily basis. I interviewed the teacher using a semi-structured script at the mid-point of the study to better understand how the curriculum matched her teaching style and to gauge its impact on her students.

I interviewed students from my case study classroom throughout the duration of the study. These semi-structured interviews enabled me to ensure that each interview centered on the same basic ideas. The students were chosen randomly. This helped me understand the students' perspectives on the activities and allowed space to consider issues that could affect the outcome of my study. The semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed. Using the memo system, I looked for thematic connections and disparities that might impact my results.

Data triangulation, or the analysis of multiple data sources, provides much trustworthiness to qualitative studies (Gay et al., 2006). Triangulation offers a greater picture of the context, gains greater insight into the phenomenon being studied, facilitates rich description, and works to increase the trustworthiness of the study (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011).

### Phase III: Follow-up

The primary focus of phase three was member checks. Making sure I understood what the students meant in their writing, while ensuring that I represented their work appropriately, was important to the overall assessment of data (Gay et al., 2006; Yin, 2009). To provide closure for the study, I conducted an unstructured closing interview

with the teacher. Allowing my partner to speak without a script provided us the opportunity to speak more freely about the experience and the change in the students.

#### Role of the Researcher

I have been a classroom teacher for the past nine years. I understand that teachers must manage students, district expectations, and time constrictions. I worked to create a collaborative relationship with my partner teacher. We used this relationship to combine our classroom expertise so that we could appropriately use my place-based content knowledge to design and implement curriculum that did serve the needs of the students, helping them understand the importance of place. In designing this study it was of the utmost importance that I respected the time and space of the teacher with which I worked.

The role of my involvement was one of a participant observer. Purcell-Gates (2011) described this role as “a continuum, with the researcher, location him or herself at varying points along this continuum.” She also suggested learning the language, cultural norms, and daily routines of the group being studied so the researcher can not only better understand what he or she observes, but so the researcher can become a natural part of the situation. As such, I spent time co-teaching the lessons and worked with small groups of writers. My involvement was always dependent on the needs of my partner teacher and the culture she created in her classroom. I never wanted to disturb the natural flow of her world.

Throughout the study I kept a reflexive journal. Because I was involved in every part of the study, understanding my responses was an important aspect to my overall analysis of the data. The practice of reflexivity allowed me to critically assess the entire

research process. While I critiqued my own bias, I assessed the progress of the study (Denzin, 1997). I divided my reflexive practices into *confessional* and *deconstructive* reflexivity. Confessional reflexivity allows the researcher to investigate their own role in the research, complete with biases, explanation of their background, and how they relate to their participant (Foley, 2002). Deconstructive reflexivity allows the researcher to reflect on the overall context of the situation and how it affects the participants' view of the situation (Foley, 2002). Through my journal I was able to contextualize events in the classroom that may have been impacted by my presence.

#### Data Collection Methods and Procedures

I collected four types of data: student writing, interviews, observations, and my reflexivity journal. Student writing is a viable data source (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). The work samples included reflections, projects, creative writing, interview transcriptions, and quick writes. I analyzed samples for each of the eight weeks of the study.

Interviews focused my attention on what happened in the classroom and provided insight into teacher and student reactions. I interviewed the teacher before the study began, at the midway point, and at the end of the study. The interviews allowed me to ascertain her perspective regarding the students' progress while gauging a sense of her feelings regarding the overall effectiveness of the lessons in her classroom (Ezzy, 2002). I chose to conduct these interviews through a semi-structured format to ensure I addressed the questions most relevant to the study (Gay et al., 2006). This structure allowed me to work through the planned questions while leaving room for follow up discussion and providing space for my partner teacher to answer the questions completely

(Fontana & Frey, 2005; Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). I interviewed a student each week to better gauge the overall students' reactions to place-based practices. These were also semi-structured interviews. All interviews were taped and transcribed.

For my third source of data, I conducted classroom observations (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). The observations facilitated my relationship with the teacher, allowed me to understand the climate of the classroom, and provided space for flexibility within the planning and implementation of the lessons. I watched for classroom management issues, which might serve as indicators that the lessons themselves were not engaging. The observations were videotaped. I also took field notes throughout to control for bias and ensure validity.

I kept a reflexive journal. Because I chose to take an active role in the classroom, it was essential that I kept track of my own activities, attitudes, hesitations, and conflicts. This journal served as a document of my involvement in the study.

I began my data collection through a preliminary interview, observation, and student writing sample collection. My focus was classroom culture, teacher attitudes and needs as well student writing proficiency. Looking at student writing served as a baseline to collaboratively design the lessons based on student needs. This allowed us to most effectively introduce place-based writing activities that served student and teacher needs.

### Data Analysis

Two methods of qualitative data analysis are content and thematic analysis. Content analysis is a method of using text to find meaningful patterns to better understand context (Ezzy, 2002). Content analysis is an *abductive* process allowing the researcher to move from the text to the research question, using inferencing to logically

connect the content to the question (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The process is as follows: first the population of study is selected. In content analysis, unlike thematic analysis, the researcher then creates units of analysis or categories based on the themes found in the literature (Ezzy, 2002). For example, place-based research suggests that students will better understand their identity through its activities (Esposito, 2012). Thus, I chose to look for writing that may be indicative of identity building practices. The process then continues with the analysis of the words or concepts within the text. I coded the text looking for words which might indicate practices of identity building. The text was used to confirm or disprove the preconceived categories (Charmaz, 2006).

Thematic analysis is an *inductive* method of finding patterns in text (Ezzy, 2002). This method is appropriate for the theoretical framework because it places student work at the center of analysis rather than predetermined codes. The first step of thematic analysis is open coding. The researcher creates categories based on the patterns evident in the text. The text itself guides the analysis rather than categorical expectations. So unlike the content analysis, the researcher analyzes the text with no preconceived notion. Rather it is coded through similarities in content.

The strength of this study was how it used content and thematic analysis in concert. This combination solved for some of the limitations of each. First, the limitations of thematic analysis rest in the researcher. The coding process is dependent upon the expertise and knowledge of the researcher. Bias, unclear inference practices, and bad coding can all taint the validity of the study. To correct this, the researcher must be very reflexive about the methods employed, their bias, and connection to the subject matter and participants (Charmaz, 2006). The primary limitation of content analysis is

that it can be used to confirm theories, but it can't be used to build them. It assumes the researcher knows the categories prior to analysis. Content analysis then limits the researcher to consider only the preexisting categories rather than use the text to discover new categories relative to the content (Ezzy, 2002).

The analysis of this study began with content analysis wherein I looked for categories of identity building and connection making as suggested by literature. The samples were recoded thematically, allowing for speculation of what might be uncovered. Using both data analysis methods, worked to address limitations, helping to strengthen the results of the study. Hanson's (2012) work with readers and writers in the middle school discovered that when students write, they "become". Thus, student writing provides a valid source of information because through its analysis the researcher can work to understand the structure and content of the piece while they extend their appreciation to what the writing says about the culture of the writer (Goldman & Wiley, 2011).

### Trustworthiness

The idea of *trustworthiness* is paramount to conducting a qualitative study of worth (Patton, 1990). Trustworthiness refers to the credibility of data collection and the effectiveness of the study's procedures (Creswell, 2003). Trustworthiness rests on the idea that the study has been completed in a way that respects the participants and accurately represents the results of the data analysis (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011).

This study used multiple sources of data to better understand the impact of the lessons on student writing, identity building practices, and cultural connections. The place-based writing activities follow the paradigms set forth in the literature and were

created collaboratively to best match the expectations and needs of the teacher. As a classroom teacher also enjoyed the luxury of using various activities with my own students. Through this practice I evaluated the appropriateness of the activities, monitored the engagement they promote, and collected student work that served as mentor texts.

I checked my own bias through my reflexive journal. Beginning the journal with my background, biases, and my own experiences in the classroom allowed me to become aware of my own context that may have affected the data analysis. I questioned my role as researcher and my methods of analysis. I worked to anticipate issues through the duration of the study as well as in my analysis (Fontana & Frey, 2005).

Member checks and peer reviews increased the trustworthiness of the study. Member checks allowed me to more aptly present what my participants said both in their writing and their interviews (Gay et al., 2006). Videotaping the observations and audio taping the interviews helped to represent the conversations and occurrences in the classroom accurately. I also used a peer, well-versed in the field of writing, to peer review my work.

Extended time in the field was also a measure of trustworthiness. Extended time is essential to understanding the nuances of your subject and the issues that may impact your study (Merriam, 1998). Throughout my study I observed the classroom, providing a greater depth of understanding and time in the field. Because of my time spent as a teacher in the school being studied as well as being a middle school teacher myself for the past nine years, I do feel as though I have a well-founded understanding of the field. My experience provided me the background to understand issues in the classroom.



## Ethical Issues

This study followed the guidelines for human research as set forth by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). As such, students signed assent forms and their parents or guardians signed consent forms. My partner teacher also signed a consent form for her participation in the study. All students, teachers, administrators and the school itself were assigned pseudonyms to help protect the anonymity of the participants.

## Limitations

Limitations of a study may include anything that may affect the study but are beyond the control of the researcher (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). My study was limited by the nature of its participants, issues with the generalization of qualitative studies, and the researcher's bias. Interviewing students is often rife with issues. In order not to disturb their daily routines, I interviewed the students during their school day. I wanted to create a free environment so the students knew what they said would remain between us and not be "used against them." I wanted students to feel comfortable representing who they really are instead of pretending to be something they are not just to impress me. By acting as a participant observer and taking an active role in the classroom, I hoped that students learned to feel comfortable speaking with me.

The nature of a case study is the results are not generalizable. The main purpose of a descriptive case study is to holistically describe the nature of a situation (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). The intention then is to use the description to tell the reader about that particular case but not use the results of the study to build theory or to claim its results can be applied to the general situation (Gay et al., 2006). Thus, the results might not necessarily be replicated in other situations.

Because I am a classroom teacher, it was natural for me to want the cooperating teacher's classroom to look like mine. I used my research journal to check my bias, helping me focus on the impact of the activities rather than the cooperating teacher's style of teaching. This was not a study evaluating teaching, so when her teaching choices differed from my own, they might have been no less as effective or impactful. I also had to gauge my expectations about the effectiveness of the activities we designed. I worked to analyze them with a sense of objectivity.

### Summary

This descriptive case study investigated the influence of place-based writing practices on a group of rural middle school students. It was conducted in a rural middle school in North Carolina. Working collaboratively with a cooperating teacher, designed and implemented lesson plans which focused the classroom instruction and writing activities around the idea of place. The 25 participating students were engaged in writing, projects, read-alouds, and activities. The study took place in the natural setting of the classroom (Barone, 2011) in order to observe how students authentically responded to this pedagogical practice (Patton, 1990). As a participant observer collected interviews, completed observations, kept a research journal while analyzing the work of approximately 25 students. The study took place over eight weeks. The data was analyzed using both content and thematic analysis to strengthen its results, solving for the limitations of each.

## CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS

“The culture we have here that’s what im proud of.”  
Alex, 7<sup>th</sup> Grader

### Overview

The purpose of this descriptive case study was to describe the influence place-based writing practices have on student identity building practices and community connections as evidenced through their writing in a rural middle school classroom. I created a collaborative relationship with Mrs. Richardson, a seventh grade language arts teacher, in order to introduce place-based writing activities and curriculum objectives that supported the students’ understanding of the place where they lived, while they learned to express that understanding in their writing. Through our working relationship we built curriculum based on the best practices of place-based writing, which also conformed to the standards for which Mrs. Richardson was accountable and the norms levied by her school administration.

The following questions served to focus the study:

- (1) What happens to student writing when place-based education practices are introduced?
- (2) What community connections become evident through student writing?
- (3) In what ways does place-based education affect students’ views of identity, community, and agency?

Chapter One introduces the study through an explanation of its purpose, a description of the problem it addressed, and a delineation of the research questions the study was designed to answer. Chapter Two explores the existing research pertinent to the themes of the study. It includes discussions regarding the concerns of rural communities, matters of rural education, and descriptions of rural adolescents, issues with student writing and instruction, and the history and practices of place-based education. Chapter Three explains the design of the case study and addressed methodology. This chapter discusses the methods of content and thematic analysis and describes how they are used as tools of interpretation in this study. It also explores the ethical issues and researcher bias present in the study.

In Chapter Four I describe the setting and participants of the study as well as outline the flow of the study. I explain my coding system and illustrate how I used thematic and content analysis in concert to analyze the data so I might capture changes occurring in student writing, identity and community connections. I use the research questions to guide my analysis showing change in student writing both in the aggregate and the individual. I conclude this chapter with a summary regarding the impact of place-based writing practices.

### Study Description

Eight years ago I was a teacher at Main Street Middle School. Driving into the graveled parking lot and looking at the façade of the school, it seemed as though not much had changed. Entering the school through the brick archway, I noticed the benches were the same, the grounds were still nicely manicured, and a student still held the door

open for me just as a young man had on my very first day of teaching. Inside the building I noticed that cosmetically the school had not received the substantial updating it required. What had changed were the signs directing parents and visitors around the main lobby. Now they were written in both Spanish and English, reflecting in the change in the demographics of the school. However, the design of Main Street Middle School remained true to the intent of its original design. It was built in the 1950's in an era where the school district adhered to the "one best model" and many schools were modeled on a factory design.

More recently, the school has struggled. Main Street School has been given three years to get at least 60% of its students to a level of proficiency in their reading and math skills, as assessed on the end of year tests. The designation of "proficiency" indicates that the students possess basic skills or a "partial command" of the skills, according to the North Carolina Department of Instruction, required by their grade level (NCDPI, 2013). According to federal guidelines, the school is labeled a *School to Watch*, which means less than 60% of its students possess the required skills. If the school does not improve its status, it may face closing or consolidation.

This study was designed to take place during eight weeks of their winter semester. I worked with 23 students in a language arts classroom. There were eight Hispanic boys, three Caucasian boys, and two African American boys. There were two Caucasian girls, six Hispanic girls, and two African American girls (they are described in greater detail in Chapter Three). Their teacher Mrs. Richardson has taught at Main Street Middle School for the past nine years. She and her family are members of the local community. She is

well versed in the issues surrounding rural populations as she grew up in a small town in the North Carolina mountains.

As we planned our lessons, I learned that much of Mrs. Richardson's time was devoted to mandatory interventions, weekly assessments, district imposed reading curriculum, and preparation for the end of the year exam. Writing, which is no longer tested or included on the teacher evaluation tool, is often left out of the daily lesson. Working to include it as the primary focus of instruction was a challenge. She discussed these conflicting expectations early in our planning session.

I'll tell you what, I am just burnt out. Everything they make me do is just bull.

How can I possibly give a seventh grade test to a kid who can barely read on a fourth grade level and expect him to succeed? They are setting these kids up to fail, and you know what, they are setting me up to fail too,

We began our planning with a survey of the writing the students completed earlier in the year. The students were given a district-created writing prompt to answer. Included with the prompt was a reading passage upon which they were to base their answers. The students completed the assignment in October but the assignments had never been graded. Mrs. Richardson explained that it was unclear whether she or a district representative was to be responsible for grading the assignments. The district never followed up with their assignment by collecting the student work, so she kept the writing in a file folder just in case. During our first planning session, she spoke to me about her frustrations.

You know what my job *should* be? I should help these kids learn how to be good people. I should be able to spend my time teaching them the skills that really

matter in life, and you know what, if they don't learn how to write, how are they going to hold down a job? For that matter, how are they going to fill out a job application? For god's sake, they think *learnt* is a word! Can you imagine that? I learnt how to flip hamburgers at McDonalds? Not exactly the kind of application that gets you into Harvard.

After reviewing the student writing, we started planning our lessons by setting several goals for the students. I spoke to her about themes I found in the literature and suggested several points we might want to consider when we looked for changes in student writing. When planning I knew we also needed to work within the expectations of her administrator to make sure the lessons would support his objectives. Based on these aspects, we decided to focus on helping students write longer pieces, with increased grammatical proficiency. We also wanted to help students to employ critical thinking practices that would encourage complex writing. As an overreaching goal, I suggested working to create a classroom environment that was student centered so we might observe rather than direct place-based conversations. Mrs. Richardson admitted that this was not her usual teaching style.

In our first interview, after describing the basic premise and activities of my study, I asked Mrs. Richardson what she would like to see resulting from our work together.

Ok, first I want the kids to not be afraid of writing, is that something I can say? I wouldn't go so far as to hope they all love writing, but if I could give them something that makes it so they can at least handle writing then I think we've got something there.

She went on to list these as her major goals for working together.

1. Work with another teacher to create curriculum that is high interest and aligned with the standards.
2. Help the students with basic grammatical conventions.
3. Help the students learn to connect what they are learning and reading with writing.

During our second planning session, I provided a skeletal template that delineated my proposed lessons. Because of the expectations of her Professional Learning Community (PLC), the group of teachers who also taught 7<sup>th</sup> grade language arts, we decided that even though we could design the vision of the study, each week we would have to review and finalize the plans. Much of what we did in her classroom was shared with the other members of her PLC, but as a whole they placed a greater emphasis on reading passages and answering multiple choice questions in an effort to prepare their students to take their year-end exams. When designing the template of the lesson plans, I tried to provide time for Mrs. Richardson to follow suit because I realized that she too would be held to those expectations.

We grouped our lessons into three main units: family, community and world, and identity. Within each unit we chose texts and writing activities that revolved around place; helping the students learn about their home community while understanding how it impacted their changing identities. Also, we wanted the students to spend their writing time focusing on *what* they were writing not on *how* they were writing. It should be noted that on the days where the place-based writing practices were not the focus, Mrs.



Richardson would often supplement her lesson plans with explicit grammar instruction that helped support concerns we noted when we analyzed the student writing.

The sequence of the lesson plans was designed to help students build an understanding about themselves and their contexts. The lessons began with a focus on the family. Then we worked to support the students' knowledge of their community. We started this unit by helping the students understand matters within their school environment. Then we moved onto the history and importance places in their town. We finished the unit by exposing students to issues that were particularly important to their state but that also were significant in their home community. In the last unit they used what they learned about place to embrace and understand their identity while gaining a sense of their agency within the context of their community.

The following table illustrates the overall flow of the units. The lesson plans, which describe each day with greater depth, can be found in Appendix B.

Table 2: Unit descriptions

Unit	Objectives	Activities	Writing Products
Family	Help the students understand the impact of “place” by learning more about the people in their family and reflecting on their lives.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. “My world is....” writing prompt (also serves as Baseline Two)</li> <li>2. Descriptive writing prompts</li> <li>3. SWOT analysis of their lives.</li> <li>3. Family interview</li> <li>4. Critique of interview</li> </ol>	<p>Writing prompts</p> <p>Interview critique</p>
Community and World	Help students describe and appreciate aspects of their school, community, and world that make their “place” unique. Help students develop, through experiential research, an understanding of why their “place” is significant.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. School tour</li> <li>2. Create brochure advertising their school.</li> <li>3. Research their town</li> <li>4. Create a persuasive essay addressing problems and solutions in their town.</li> <li>5. Learn about issues in the larger world and connect them to issues in their community.</li> <li>6. Write and critique an essay about those issues.</li> </ol>	<p>Brochure</p> <p>My town persuasive essay</p> <p>My world persuasive essay</p>
Identity	Help students connect their identities to “place” to better understand why their identity matters and how it is shaped by the world around them.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. “Pride is....” writing prompts</li> <li>2. Reading student poetry</li> <li>3. Writing and sharing their poetry</li> <li>4. Reading about advocacy (specifically about athletes, musicians and business people who have given back to their community).</li> <li>5. Reflecting on advocacy.</li> </ol>	<p>Writing prompts</p> <p>“I am from....” poem</p> <p>Reflection</p>

## Unit One: Family

The students investigated the idea of family through the collection of oral histories. I felt it was important to include this activity as it reflected the traditional implementation of place-based writing practices. Also, the interviews were intended to help the students understand the people in their family who may have impacted their own identities and community connections. They began the process by filling out the K (what I know) and W (what I want to know) columns in a KWL chart (know/want to know/what I learned). They also drew a symbolic character chart. They used symbols to help tell the story of the people they planned to interview. For example, if their mother loved to cook, they might draw a pot or a spoon to symbolize one of her strengths. This also helped reinforce the meaning of symbolism, a concept the 7<sup>th</sup> graders were expected to learn.

They learned to write effective interview questions based on the information they provided in the KWL chart. Mrs. Richardson read the interview of an athlete who chose to be an advocate for his home community. She pointed out the effective questions by teaching the difference between what she termed a “shallow” question and a “deep” question.

“What would you rather have, a shallow bowl of ice cream or a big fat deep one?” Then she went on to ask, “Which would take longer to eat?” The kids replied in unison. “The big fat one!” She continued her explanation. “That’s what a good question does, it gets you excited, and it takes a long time to get to the bottom of it.”

After the students concluded their interview, they completed a reflection. This was not the intended assignment, but due to Mrs. Richardson’s time constraints and a bit

of a misunderstanding, the reflection served to document the students' understanding of the impact of their interview. It also allowed them to critique their work as an interviewer. The original assignment would have prompted the students to create a piece that showed what they learned from the interview. They were to compose a letter, a diary entry, a song or rap, or a talking picture that showed what they learned in their interview. I reflected on the change in the assignment and debated whether the issue was time management or whether Mrs. Richardson was unsure about how to introduce a multi-genre reflection piece. I also wondered if my instructions were clear enough. I felt perhaps I should have taken more time to explain the multi-genre projects. I also could have provided mentor texts to help both Mrs. Richardson and the students understand how to take the details of their interview and incorporate them into a creative, reflective product. However, the focus of this study was not to change teaching practices but to evaluate the change in student writing when provided with place-based writing techniques. So even though the assignment was not done as I would have done it, the students were exposed to the place-based idea of interviewing family members. Through this they learned about their family's impact on the student's lives and identities. The reflection piece helped the students think critically about their work while they considered what they learned through the interview process.

#### Unit Two: Community and World

Teaching the students about their home community was a prime goal of this study. The community lessons were divided into those that allowed students to investigate their school and their local world and those that helped students connect their local experiences to issues encountered on the state level. Activities in these units

including taking a sensory tour of the school, designing a brochure to advertise their school, debating problems and solutions to issues in their school, creating research briefs about the history, economics, and local attractions of their community, and writing persuasive essays about issues that related to their lives. An aspect of this unit that directly related to the Common Core State Standards was problem/solution thinking. Also problem/solution thinking is a core aspect of critical theory. Critical theory posits that students must understand their local situation and the power relationships therein before they can understand how they impact the situations they observe on a daily basis (Friere & Macedo, 1987).

After the students completed the activities that related to their school, Mrs. Richardson and I debated how to teach the students information about their town. Mrs. Richardson was very vocal concerning her intentions.

I'm not going to lie to them. I not going to be like, if you stay here you'll be rich and famous and be able to do everything you want to do in life. That's just not true. But I will be glad to teach them about the history of this town, both good and bad, and help them understand all the resources that are available here. I mean we have like four colleges within 30 minutes of us. Not a lot of people can say that. You know I wonder if they even know that. Anyway, pride is never a bad thing.

To help support the students' understanding of place, we chose stories about the history of the town, explanations of festivals, and traditions, as well as descriptions of historic buildings and stories about famous people from the area. Students created research briefs to evidence their comprehension of the reading passages. They

brainstormed current problems in the community and discussed feasible solutions. Mrs. Richardson spent a lesson explaining the plausibility and the reality of local control. Using their brainstorming activity, the students wrote a persuasive or a problem/solution essay. This activity aligned with the first baseline assessment (to be described later in this chapter). The assignment prompted the students to respond to a reading in the form of an essay. However, unlike the first assignment, students were not given a formula to guide their writing. Instead, they used their research briefs to inform their writing. They also chose their own problem to write about while they learned to use text to support their proposed solution. Although more formulaic than the open ended prompts previously used, this assignment allowed them to practice their skills of writing, employing the skill of problem/solution thinking to discuss local issues for which they had some first-hand knowledge or interest.

To help the students understand the larger world around them, they completed a similar activity, but instead of focusing on their town, they focused on their state and learned about issues that affected their lives on a larger scale. They chose to investigate topics such as education, environmental protection (fracking), immigration, and health care. They were able to choose the topics with which they most connected. This increased their motivation, and many worked outside of the classroom to learn more, taking trips to the school library and talking to their parents about their opinions regarding the issues. They again created research briefs, worked with their classmates to brainstorm, and finished the unit with an essay instead of a debate. Based on the results of the first essay, Mrs. Richardson thought having them write another essay would be a stronger way to reinforce the skills we taught in the previous lessons.

The students were given back their first essay (the essay about local issues, described in the previous paragraph) to reflect on their work and note the things they would do differently. Based on their comments, we replaced the rubric I created for this assignment with one more reflective of the students' comments. It included these four categories:

- I used what I read to talk about the problem.
- I used what I understand about my world to talk about the solution.
- I used my best writing—spelling, using capital letters, and a period at the end of a sentence.
- I wrote about what I know using my own words and words from my reading.

It was important that these categories made sense to the students. They needed to understand the expectations of the assignment so we took time to explain the rubric while allowing the students to explain it back to us in their own words. Then Mrs. Richardson explicitly explained several concepts that would directly impact how the students wrote. This included lessons on paraphrasing and summarizing, using transition words, and capitalization. Once we felt comfortable that the students understood the reading, comprehended the assignment, and were aware of our expectations, they began their essay.

When reading through their essays, I had to wonder, “where did this unnatural voice originate? Where did they first read an essay that was constructed with such rigid rules that stilted expression? Why couldn't they transfer the voice they used when answering the open ended prompts?” I felt that one solution would be to provide model

texts. If I were to do this again, I would add in a day of reading to expose the students to model essays; preferably those written by students. I asked Mrs. Richardson whether using model texts might be helpful. She replied, “I’ll tell you what, that’s what could make a difference. You know these kids are really good at copying.” Although I knew she offered this last statement as a bit of a joke, I realized that there was a grain of truth in her comedy. The kids seemed to need a voice to emulate and never having the chance to hear what an essay written by a child their age sounded like, they instead emulated an overformal academic voice to which they couldn’t relate. Although I wanted their voices to organically grow through place-based writing practices, I was realistic in understanding that the students needed models. Essays can be a challenging genre especially for those students struggling to understand how they are “supposed to sound” (Fletcher, 2001).

In this assignment, the students were able to choose the issues with which they most connected and that choice provided the opportunity to include personal stories, to ask meaningful questions, and to show that these issues were important to them. The students also indicated how they were able to intertwine issues from the dominant culture with issues and speech patterns from their contextual backgrounds.

The students demonstrated an understanding of the connection of their local problems to actions and actors of the larger dominant state and world culture. Students spent time reading about the history of their town and issues which directly impacted their way of life. They were engaged in all parts of the classroom work and even suggested other things we should include in the reading folders when we do this again next year.



The major opportunity of this unit was the nature of the products. If I were to do this again, I would allow the students to have their choice of genres. For example, a student could talk about fracking in a song or create a brochure comparing its pros and cons. Perhaps a student could write a television commercial to support their teacher or a commercial to try to persuade people to visit their town. By only allowing students to answer through the essay format, I feel I restricted their creativity and identity. However, focusing on the essay format more directly aligned with the Common Core State Standards for which Mrs. Richardson was held accountable. This compromise provided space for the students to practice their essay writing skills while allowing them to write and read about issues that directly related to and impacted their home community. This concession may be the reality when introducing place-based writing practices into a standardized curriculum.

### Unit Three: Identity

The last major unit of the study was intended to help students describe their identity and show how it connected to their contextual community. After they learned the value of their families, home communities, and their impact on the larger world, they were given the opportunity to reflect on their own identity.

To start the unit, Mrs. Richardson read the poem *Invictus* (Appendix D) to the students. As we planned this unit, it became necessary to coordinate what we were doing to the standardized goals of the rest of the department. Together we chose the poem from several suggested by her departmental PLC in order to teach the standardized curriculum points from the Common Core. She was responsible for covering the concepts of theme, structure, format, and tone. After reading the poem aloud to the

students, she began her conversation addressing those points. However, the whole group conversation soon became more about the content of the poem than its structure. The discussion focused on how details of the poem related to the students and their lives. When debating the tone of the poem and whether or not it was sad, one student remarked,

“It sounds to me like no one can bring him down. There’s nothing depressing about that.”

Another student connected the poem back to their feelings about their town. “It’s like we talked about last week. About how even though we don’t have as many jobs here, this is still a good place to live.”

To agree with that point another student finished, “Yeah, you have to work against whatever is holding you back.”

Mrs. Richardson also asked if the students identified with the poem. At the beginning of the discussion there were only two hands raised. She took the poem apart line by line, each time connecting it with moments in her life and allowing students to associate the sentiments with their own experiences. She talked about vocabulary they might not be familiar with, explaining the meaning of the words through moments of her life and popular films, all the while allowing students to add their own experiences. At the end of the analysis she asked again, “OK, NOW who identifies with this poem?” This time all hands were raised.

This moment revealed how important connections to place and identity are to contextualizing and creating effective lessons. The poem, not originally a part of the lesson plan, became important because it showed that students associated what they

already knew to the poem while using it as a vehicle to express their identity building practices as they negotiated them to explain their emotions.

After working with *Invictus*, they explored the idea of the “I am from....” poem through samples written by other middle school students. Based on the work of George Ella Lyon (1999) and her book *Where I’m From*, the focus of this unit was to have the students write poems that reflected their identities as they were influenced by their home communities. The students brainstormed characteristics of their lives, and the things that best characterized their daily experiences. They were provided a planning sheet to help focus their work. The students were puzzled about using the formula. They wanted to fill in the blanks literally. For example, the first stanza says, “I am from \_\_\_\_\_ (choose an ordinary object).”

Immediately, most students wrote “I am from G.” (G signifies the name of their home town) instead of choosing an ordinary object from their brainstorming sheet. We directed them back to the mentor texts while equating the activity to filling out *Mad Libs*, which made filling out the sheet more into a game than an arduous task.

Mrs. Richardson and I also contributed by reading our own poems to the class. After writing her poem, Mrs. Richardson remarked,

I love things like this where you can just sit back and remember. It’s like my dad and his trophies. He’s passed on and all I have left is his class ring and his trophies. Those trophies don’t mean anything to anyone else, but they sure are meaningful to me. And besides that, I think the poem turned out pretty well, if I do say so myself.”

The students reacted to our poems with questions and conversation that mirrored the conversation that surrounded *Invictus*. The students were given an opportunity to connect their own experiences to our poems. This conversation helped the group as they began to write their poems. What follows is Mrs. Richardson's poem. (My poem is included in appendix E).

I am from Appalachia, from Walkmans and Cassettes.

I am from the mountains, beautiful, snowy, serene.

I am from mountain laurels, daisies and the river.

I am from reunions and decorations and strength and hard work from Richardsons and Jones and sheer love.

I am from the loud and bossy and the quiet and patient.

From "For Pete's sake" and "Ain't got none."

I am from God--no matter whether it's screaming Southern Baptists or silent nightly prayer.

I am from Ashe County and West Virginia, chicken dumplings, brownstone front cakes and chocolate gravy.

From Uncle Tim jumping a child's dirt bike straight into the pavement = seven stitches (when he was an adult). And from Uncle Tim throwing a live black snake around Uncle Jim's neck while Tim was riding a motorcycle= road rash, blistered behind and lots of laughs later in life (teen years).

I am from several published genealogy books (thanks to the tireless work of my Uncle Danny), Pete Rose, thousands upon thousands of family photos (thanks

again Uncle Danny) from trophies, a class ring, small tokens of family memories that serve me daily.

Upon reflection, I would move this unit to the third week of the lessons to follow the family interviews. The students evidenced voices that more directly reflected the personas I observed in the classroom. I think moving it to an earlier place would help them access their authentic writing voices. This might help them when writing the essays in later units, instilling a sense of confidence and helping the students realize that they write well when they write like they sound. This might assist them when they are writing genres that they do not necessarily like. I spoke to Alex about how he felt about writing essays.

It's just that teenager part of me that doesn't want to write those essays. I have never been a really writing guy but I have to admit, when I get into it I can put a lot of emotion into it. But anytime we get an essay assignment I'm like 'oh my god' unless it's actually something I care about, you know; something that I like and am interested in.

## Conclusions

The study was divided into three major units to help students understand the importance of connecting, understanding, interacting, and advocating for their home "place." Using place as a starting point for our conversations allowed the students to take a personal stake in the activities. As will be illustrated, their writing changed because they were interested in talking about issues, people, and places they understood. By using family, world and community, and personal identity as the platform for instruction we positioned place as the dominant feature of instruction.

At the conclusion of our time together, I spoke to Mrs. Richardson about her overall feelings about the study. I referenced our goals of making writing accessible to the students, and using our relationship to design and implement effective curriculum. We also worked toward improving the students' use of grammatical conventions, and their ability to connect reading and learning with their writing. She replied,

I'll tell you. I was surprised. I was surprised that I didn't have to hunt their homework down. I was surprised at how much they involved their families. I got three calls and an email from parents that had questions about what we were doing, I mean in a positive way. One parent told me it was the first time her daughter had said anything to her about school all year! And their writing, it's well, different. When we were reading the poems, I just couldn't believe how honest they were. Remember, these are struggling kids and they just let it all out there.

She agreed that the collaborative relationship we created helped with curriculum development and implementation and that our collaboration assisted her PLC in understanding the intention of the standards. Although the other teachers did not always choose to do what we were doing, they did take several of our activities and found them useful.

The results of my analysis also showed that the students improved in their use of grammatical conventions, and Mrs. Richardson said,

Looking at the writing like we did made it easier to teach grammar. I just saw what most of them were doing wrong and did a quick lesson and you know I could see the changes in their writing.

However, when we talked about helping the students form meaningful connections with reading and learning through their writing, she felt that the students needed more time. We talked through some strategies that she could use going forward in her school year that might help them.

The last point, helping students find writing accessible, was according to Mrs. Richardson, the biggest accomplishment of our work together.

OK these are kids who don't like to write. All of a sudden they're running in with their poems asking me to read it! Even the essays. It's like they had a reason to write that they understood. That's what got them excited. I don't know if I'm saying it right but they understood their issues, they understood why they were important, and that's why they wrote.

When reflecting together, much of Mrs. Richardson's thinking revolved around student writing. The purpose of this project was to question the impact of place in the classroom. As we worked together, the question of whether place might be used effectively in a standards-based classroom was what helped focus our lesson planning. The introduction of the poem *Invictus* is a good example of this. Her PLC required her to cover a poem and teach literary terms. When she taught it, through her connections to place and a discussion which revolved around the place-based experiences of the students, the students found meaning in the poem and their comprehension improved. Mrs. Richardson was able to accomplish her goals and the students learned with deeper, more authentic connections because the poem was taught through the frame of their understanding of place.

I asked Mrs. Richardson about the impact of place on her teaching philosophy and practice. Overall, she plans to use the reading and writing centers concept to limit her direct instruction. She also found news stories about North Carolina, and poems and short stories from writers in the South to use for her End of Grade testing preparation, instead of using the passages supplied by her school district. Next year she will integrate writing throughout her instruction, but she will focus on writing that is based in the students' experiences rather than writing as reaction to passages. We have made plans to work together in the future, sharing curriculum, and resources. This is the part of integrating place into her daily practice that prevents her from full implementation: finding resources, preparing prompts, and creating new curriculum instead of just passing out workbooks. With all her other responsibilities, this preparation might not be manageable but she argues,

You know if we worked as a team, you know the other teachers and me, it would be possible and maybe if they read some of this writing (the students' pieces), maybe they would see that it's worth it.

#### The Creation of Themes

As detailed in chapter three, this study combined content and thematic analysis. Within content analysis, coding units are created based on an analysis of the existing literature first. Then those themes are applied to the collected data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This supports the researcher in his or her analysis because the codes are connected to a larger body of research. However, this method does not allow for independent discovery and may inadvertently ignore themes that are just as important but not yet recognized by researchers in the field (Charmaz, 2006).



Thematic analysis then places data at the center of analysis. The researcher uses an open coding process to create categories based on the patterns evident in the data. The data is then coded according to its content which may be supported by existing research or may reach beyond previously cited research thus adding to the field.

The strength of this study is how it used content and thematic analysis in concert. Using them together helps address the limitations of each. To incorporate this methodology in my study, I began my inquiry with content analysis. Using the themes I found in the literature, I created broad categories by which to analyze the data. Then I used the work of the students to better define the categories. Next, I applied my categorical assumptions to the data. This enabled me to find codes that were supported by the literature, thus adding strength to my analysis. It also allowed me to find new codes in the data itself to guide my process.

In the opening activity, students answered a variety of prompts. I chose this as the opening activity because it allowed me to better understand the students' priorities, social understandings, and social networks. The mechanics of writing were less important than its content, which is why I chose to have the students work with an open ended prompt. The prompts provided a sample beginning that the students finished using their own thoughts and writing process. These open ended prompts allowed for authentic and student driven answers. They were arranged at centers. Each center had a different prompt printed on a bright sheet of paper. For example, one center was labeled "my town is...." If the student chose that center, they answered the prompt, beginning their answer with "my town is." The students floated from center to center, which created the

opportunity for them to answer the prompts they were most drawn to thus increasing the authentic motivation of their answers. The prompts included:

My family is....

My life is....

I hope....

Perfect is....

My future is....

My town is....

I used this first set of data to perform an initial analysis. This allowed me to contextualize the circumstances that comprised the students' backgrounds and the attitudes and values that informed their identities. I combined the student answers with what I knew from the literature to create my set of codes. I then worked to code the two baseline assignments. Using this activity to gauge the effectiveness of my codes, I triangulated what I found in the writing with student and teacher interviews, classroom observations, and my own reflexive journal. After I created the initial codes, I connected them to the guiding research questions of the study.

*What happens to student writing when place-based education writing practices are introduced?*

To answer this question, I defined the essential issues in student writing that I most wanted to influence. I began by reviewing the literature, particularly the work of Applebee and Langer (2012) as they authored the *Writing Next* report, which offered suggestions for writing instruction based on a sampling of writing across the country. I also worked with the research of Smith and Sobel (2010) who researched student writing

through a place-based perspective, thus making their work specific to this study. Several big picture themes emerged. Applebee and Langer (2012) suggested that student writing suffers in length, complexity, and the students' understanding of audience and author's purpose. Smith and Sobel (2010) indicated that student writing should celebrate social capital and should show traditional communication patterns. Mrs. Richardson agreed that her students had trouble with grammatical conventions, writing with understanding, and length. When analyzing the impact of place-based writing practices on student writing, I focused my coding to track changes and patterns in length, grammatical conventions, complex thoughts, traditional communication patterns, evidence of social capital, and an understanding of audience and purpose.

*What community connections become evident when students engage in writing about their community?*

The term *community* must first be defined in order to answer this question. Ludden (2011) wrote that social networks were indicative and essential to the idea of community. Kelly (2009) posited that a sense of belonging to a group of people and a set of practices is inherent to the idea of community. Also, a sense of stewardship develops a sense of community (Azano, 2009). To better understand what community meant to the students, I asked them to describe their world. They suggested that their world was defined through family, friends, activities (such as sports, music and art), religion, and education. From this mindset and what I learned from the literature and for the purposes of this study, community is then defined through the idea of stewardship, shared practices, and social networks that include family, friends, school, activities, religion, and education.

*In what ways do place-based writing practices affect students' views of identity, community and agency?*

Identity exists on a continuum (Cruddas, 2007). Adolescents experience identity as an ever changing idea that shifts as friends, context, and situational pressures change (Alexander & Fox, 2010; Bean & Harper, 2012). Rural adolescents struggle with their identities through disassociation as they try on identities that don't truly fit but are suggested by the dominant culture (Esposito, 2012; Wake, 2009). Their identities may shift according to their situation (Haas, 1991). They may find the emulation of their own cultural identity problematic. It should be noted that just because they are *of* a culture doesn't mean that they understand that culture (Wigginton, 1991). Elizabeth spoke to me about the idea of trying on identities within her crowd of friends,

“I admit it. Most of the Hispanics at this school are *swag tags*. They think they are cool and hip but they really aren't. They try to copy every bad thing the African Americans do.”

Alex, agreed with Elizabeth.

“Yeah I can name a lot of people who do that but like no one really sticks to their traditions. People try to act like rappers that you see on TV even though they should just be themselves. There is nothing wrong with being yourself, but I guess to some people that's just not enough.”

Identity may be discovered and discussed through writing about real life in authentic setting (Jacobs, 2011). Writing helps students understand and value their cultural backgrounds so they are not subsumed by the dominant culture (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Esposito, 2012). When the students wrote about their identity they wrote

about both their present situations and their future expectations. Their future plans included going to college, having a family, making a living, and setting goals. They also described their more immediate futures, what they might be doing later that day or how they might do something differently. They painted a picture of their daily lives, values, interactions, and personal choices. For the purposes of this study, identity suggests an awareness of social/cultural capital, patterns of self-understanding, future expectations, and connection or deference to the dominant culture.

The following table illustrates the research questions and the categories used to analyze student writing.

Table 3: Categories

Research question	Categories
What happens to student writing when place-based education writing practices are introduced?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Length</li> <li>2. Grammatical Conventions</li> <li>3. Complexity of Thought</li> <li>4. Traditional communication patterns</li> </ol>
What community connections become evident when students engage in writing about their community?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Stewardship</li> <li>2. Shared practices</li> <li>3. Social Networks</li> </ol>
In what ways do place-based writing practices affect students' views of identity, community and agency?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Social capital</li> <li>2. Patterns of self-understanding</li> <li>3. Future expectations</li> <li>4. Connections to dominant and contextual culture</li> </ol>

### Coding Organization

In order to better understand the changes in student writing, I decided to record the results of my analysis in two ways, the first was to count the number of samples that included examples of the code and the second was to find textual examples that evidenced the codes. Analyzing the results numerically allowed me to better understand

overall changes in the writing while gauging the effectiveness of each thematic assignment. For example, if I noted that 11 of the students lacked an understanding of audience and purpose for a particular assignment, I would know in the next lesson that might be an area to look for improvement. It also helped me better evaluate categories such as length and grammatical conventions that were described more accurately by a proficiency rating than through textual examples.

The next step in the coding process was to choose textual examples of each code from the data. This allowed me to see several things. By analyzing the textual examples I improved my understanding of the change in the use and quality of language. I also better illustrated my coding system and my interpretation of each of the categories. This helped ensure the codes were consistently applied throughout the study.

I also chose to assess the writing of three students to see how they changed individually as a result of the study. I chose these students because they epitomized three trends I saw throughout the class. I found that students struggled in their writing skills due to issues with language. I also observed students who did not connect socially and were withdrawn, not participating in class. The third group of students could be described as accelerated. Due to the fact that much of their time was spent filling out worksheets, these students were bored. They either acted out or worked quickly, finishing their assignment early, with nothing left to do. When analyzing their writing, I found it formulaic and lacking substantive signs of identity. I hoped to give them the opportunity to authentically express themselves.

The first student I chose was Elizabeth, a Hispanic female, who developed connections to her community and a sense of identity that was due in part to her religious

convictions. Although a strong oral communicator and reader, she struggled with writing. I chose her to show how the conventions of student writing changed. Tyrone, an African American male, was my choice to show how place-based writing practices impacted student connections to community. Working through a learning disability, his writing skills were on grade level but his writing was often disconnected and egocentric as he struggled to connect to the world around him. Cynthia, a Hispanic female, excelled as a reader and a writer. However, her writing was often too formulaic, writing for a grade rather than to express herself. I chose her writing to show how patterns of identity changed when place-based writing practices were used as a basis for the curriculum.

#### Baseline Assessments

To better understand the students' writing practices, I collected two baseline pieces of writing. The first assignment was conducted earlier in the year. The prompt was created by the school district and their expectation was that each 7<sup>th</sup> grader complete it as a measure of Common Core Standards accountability.

The students answered this prompt: *Compare and contrast rap and poetry*. They were given a reading passage upon which to base their response. Mrs. Richardson, when giving me the samples, lamented, "I know they are formulaic, but that's what the district wanted."

As a whole the samples showed many similarities. The writing, style, and organization was formulaic. It was obvious that the students were given a template to guide the organization and writing of their work. Each sample started with a paragraph that was used to grab attention. The next paragraph was used to discuss the history of rap and then poetry. Then they wrote about the similarities and differences between the two

genres of expression. The last part of the essay revolved around some sort of closing. It seemed that the instructions for the closing didn't receive the same sort of attention as the rest of the essay because the students' responses varied the most in their conclusions. Overall, it was also the weakest section of the essay in its both its length and use of grammatical conventions.

This example came from an essay I considered possessing a below expectation use of grammatical conventions. There were issues in verb confusion and capitalization.

“the think about poetry is that it can tell a story about a person lives.”

This sample was written with acceptable grammatical conventions. There were no major spelling issues, the student used capitalization and punctuation correctly, and there was no evidence of verb or pronoun confusion.

“Since the day people could talk we have had stories or songs.”

In the body of their essay, the students used facts from their reading but it was clear that many students didn't actually understand the facts or the vocabulary due to their incorrect use. When used correctly, the facts the students referenced were regurgitations. There was no real critique or indication of a depth of comprehension. The students wrote with a controlled voice. Their writing sounded like they were trying to match a model or copy an example. The result read as unnatural.

This is an example from a student who misused facts.

“Centeries ago in the 1970s musicans made rap with the beat of their drums in west Africa.”

Grammatically, students struggled, especially those students who were labeled ELL (English Language Learners). They confused pronouns and tenses. Misspellings



were prevalent and students struggled with capitalization, punctuation, and sentence structure. The length of the writing was also problematic as 12 of the students wrote below the expected length of one page. What the writing did show was potential. Students showed signs of connecting with their audience by using familiar pronouns and vernacular expressions.

What I found when I assessed Baseline One was that length and grammatical conventions were below expectations. Students wrote formulaically and their writing lacked complex thoughts. As a whole they did not employ traditional communication patterns. The writing showed no connections to their community and no sense of stewardship. The writing lacked markers of student identity patterns, connections to context, evidence of social capital, or indications of future expectations.

In Baseline Two the students answered a prompt that more directly related to the subject of my study. They answered the prompt “My world is....” There were no restrictions or formulaic expectations for their responses. The students were expected to fill up the page that was provided.

The change in their writing was apparent. There were fewer grammatical errors, and their answers ranged from the deeply personal to the amusingly casual. Their responses were individualistic and were informed by the things that defined their worlds. The first theme that emerged was the importance of family. The second theme revolved around activities in which the students participated. These activities impacted the students’ identities. For example, the students who played soccer wrote about their favorite players and their dedication to their favorite teams. The students who were musicians wrote about their musical activities in and out of school. The final theme

revolved around identity. Education and religion were both influential in helping the students explain their decisions for the future.

Overall, Baseline Two showed an improvement in the use of grammatical conventions and length. Complex thoughts and traditional communication increased both in frequency and quality. The ideas of stewardship, shared practices, and social networks were present in the samples which indicated students' understanding of and connection to their community.

These two students wrote with an understanding of the importance of their social networks and the stewardship of the people within the networks.

“I love my family and would do anything for them because I love them I can't live without them.”

“They help me and support me through all of lives hardships thats why family is my world.”

The writing also showed markers of student identities in all categories: patterns of self-understanding, future expectations, connections to dominant culture, and connections to context. These two students showed how religion and education have both shaped their identities.

“God loves me and respects me for who I am.”

“Then there's my education since it will help me get a good job to sustain myself and help out my family.”

The language in these responses was conversational and at times even confessional. The writing evidenced motivation and authentic expression. It didn't contain formulaic responses nor did it contain out of context facts. Interestingly, even the

ELL students wrote using more appropriate grammatical conventions. Baseline Two, which related more directly to the concepts behind place-based writing practices, suggested that the students have the ability to communicate in a manner that reveals identity patterns and connections to communities with an increased writing proficiency.

The baseline assignments were used to create an understanding of the skills the students possessed as writers, members of their community, and individuals. After analyzing the baselines, I answered my research questions by analyzing the samples both through the work of the composite group and the writing of individual students. I considered thematic changes based on my coding system. To gauge the impact of place-based writing practices, I evaluated changes in their writing ability, their connections to community and their patterns of identity.

### Student Writing

My first research question asked, “What happens to student writing when place-based education writing practices are introduced?” To answer this question I analyzed student writing through the categorical assignments of length, grammatical conventions, complexity of thought, and use of traditional communication patterns. Originally I also included understanding of author’s purpose and use of genre, as suggested by Applebee and Langer (2012). However, with my participants this suggestion was not an area of deficiency and did not alter throughout the study.

Although I worked with all the writing I received, to gauge the change in writing I focused on the two most complex pieces, their essay about issues in North Carolina and their “I am from....” poems. By starting with the two baseline assignments and then moving to these two assignments I was able to illustrate how the writing changed

throughout the study. The students wrote the essay in the middle of the study and the poem at the end of the study.

### The Class

To better understand how place-based writing practices impacted student writing I began by assessing the features of the essay written about issues in North Carolina that impacted the students. When evaluating the samples as a group I analyzed the writing proficiency and style of the reflection pieces by first looking at the length of the writing. I compared the essay to the first essay they wrote (Baseline One). Ten of the 23 samples, as compared to four of the 23 baseline samples, exceeded the length expectations. Grammatically, more of the samples, 7 as compared to 1, were considered written with conventions that were above expectation. As a whole, the most substantial change was displayed in their ability to employ complex thoughts. Many students wrote demonstrating that they understood the nature of these complex issues. Very few took one side or labeled the differing sides of the issues as good or bad.

These three samples, all taken from Alex's work show how he grew in the use of complex thoughts in his writing.

#### Sample from Baseline One

“People have done great things to rap.”

#### Sample from the essay

“Everyone deserves a good education and teachers should get paid for the education they give.”

#### Sample from the “I am from...” Poem

“I am from the beach and curiosity, from April and Keith and the strong.”

However, as with the first assignment, when the assignment took the form of an essay, students reverted to an unnatural use of what they deemed “proper” English. What resulted was an essay that reflected what they read and showed a connection to their life as it was framed by their place but was written in language that often stilted and unnecessarily formal. Thus, when I evaluated their use of traditional communication patterns I found many of the samples lacking. Their writers’ voices were affected rather than reflective of their speech patterns.

The “I am from....” poems were written with language that did adhere to their traditional communication patterns. In other words, they wrote in the same way they spoke. Because the students were exposed to a variety of samples rather than just one and because the students were allowed to get help from their peers throughout the process, each poem was written in a style that reflected contextual connections. Generally, this group of samples showed the most substantial change in students’ use of traditional communication patterns and complex thoughts.

When analyzing the writing itself, all samples were at or above length expectations. Also, 20 of the 23 were at or above our expectations in their use of grammatical conventions. The most common mistake was the misuse of words such as *were, where, and there*. However, the punctuation and capitalization issues of the baseline assignments were no longer present. Generally, the patterns of language misuse typical of ELL students were not as much of an issue. As mentioned, the biggest area of growth was the use of traditional communication patterns. I should note that I encouraged Spanish speaking students to write in their home language if they chose. The other area where I saw growth in their writing was their ability to write using complex

thoughts. The students combined different and at times contrasting ideas to paint a picture of the disparate forces that formed their identities.

### Elizabeth

Elizabeth was a Hispanic female who was a member of the Pentecostal religion. Her religious affiliation was worth mentioning because it impacted her identity and community connections, which were apparent in her writing. She possessed a strongly defined identity and her writing showed how she connected to her community. Where she struggled was with her ability to effectively communicate those thoughts through writing. Elizabeth was a strong reader and speaker but her voice didn't translate into her writing. She had difficulty with grammatical conventions and often misused pronouns, verbs and tenses. Her writing problems confused Mrs. Richardson because of Elizabeth's strength with oral communication.

She is one that I just don't get. Usually my Hispanic students that struggle with writing, you can hear it in their speech patterns. But she doesn't have those issues, maybe because they speak English and Spanish in her house.

I spoke to Elizabeth about writing.

I think that whenever you are writing about yourself you should go really deep into it and it really doesn't take me long but it is important actually because when I was little I loved to write stories. But now I grew out of it. I guess because since I get older I have to do a lot of things at my church so I have less time.

Elizabeth's writing served as an example of how students might improve in the mechanics of their writing style. I assessed her writing based on her use of grammatical conventions, her ability to write longer pieces, and her use of traditional communication

patterns. Baseline One evidenced many of her writing issues. She misused tenses and pronouns. She also misused multiple meaning words. For example when she wrote “here” she actually meant “hear”. Her writing was confusing because it was a disconnected series of thoughts that related back to the reading passage but did not flow in a logical pattern. Additionally, none of her sentences showed complex thinking patterns as many of her sentences were simple, declarative sentences.

#### Elizabeth’s Baseline One

So why judge something you don’t know much about. The thing about poetry is that it can tell a story about a person lives. Its something you here. Or read. Did you know play, spoken word and slam poetry are still alive and kikcen?

Poetry gained a focus on pleasing the eyes with the writing word. It was from the greek and helped people talk about there live. But its different from rap.

So when you here a poet singing his poem you wont here him talking about sex and cusing. That is a difference between rap and poetry. Before rap expanded and sang about drugs and violence rap was simply drumbeats only telling history. That’s win it was African and still good. But soon it changed ad now you would never now that its what it ended up to be.

Do you know that rap and poetry are different? Well, they are and I am glad.

In Baseline Two, her identity was more apparent. She delineated religion as her main influence. Her spelling and sentence structure improved and although she struggled with apostrophes (as in let’s instead of lets and human’s instead of humans). She also wrote “fell” instead of “feel” which mirrored her speech patterns. She did use

capitalization appropriately and wrote her piece within the length expectations. Her writing showed more complexity in her thought patterns as she critically assessed her relationship with her religion.

#### Elizabeth's Baseline Two

My world is Jesus because He supports all my needs and He never let's me down like human's do, and He always with me and never leaves me. Also He gives love to everyone and you fell peace and joy All the Time.

It is in her essay that I saw real improvement. She chose the topic of education to write about. She was very curious about the situations of teachers in North Carolina. In fact, she spent one of her lunch periods talking to Mrs. Richardson about how she felt about teaching. She recognized how important her education was and told me,

“I know it's real important that I do well in school. I don't know if I will go to college or not because I don't know if I could leave my family but I'll say this, I want to be a really smart person. I know that my teachers help me do that, even the ones that I don't like.”

Elizabeth's essay demonstrated an understanding of the issues and how teachers' situations might impact her own. Beyond that her writing improved. First, her spelling was much better. She still had issues with apostrophes but the misuse of multiple meaning words decreased, (although several times she misused “to”). Her sentences showed greater complexity as she moved beyond the simple sentence structure. The length of her essay exceeded the expectations of the assignment. Perhaps what was most different about her essay was the connectedness of her writing. Instead of statements that



were disconnected, originated from the reading, her writing reflected what she read but used her own language.

#### Elizabeth's Essay

If I don't have a teacher in my classroom how am I supposed to learn? Right now in my state teachers arnt so happy. There are alot of problems and alot of things that they are right to not be happy about. My teacher is really good. I hope she is making more money than the people who are mad. But what if she isn't. What if she just left one day and I have no one to teach me. What should I do then?

Education is important for all kids. It should be important to tax payers. The teachers are protesting at the capital building and they want to make sure people are listening. They are hard workers and they don't think they are making to much money. And I agree. I think they work hard to and I think that they should get more money. Don't you?

So don't you think teachers are important? Don't you think that they should get enough money to rase their kids? I think they should and I think you should think so to. So lets support students and support the teachers.

Elizabeth's "I am from..." poem presented her identity steeped in religion, pride, and family. Her writing takes a mature tone as she wrote that "things that are imposibl will happen because God is powerful." As an effective communicator, she had fewer spelling errors than her other pieces and in this piece she has no apostrophe or words with multiple meanings errors. Her writing continued to improve with her use of complex sentences. Again the length of her piece exceeded the expectation of the assignment.

Elizabeth showed herself to be an effective writer who successfully explained her thoughts through appropriate grammatical conventions.

Elizabeth's "I am from...." poem

I am from pictures for memories from God and holy spirits. I'm from the peaceful I'm from the creek and the trees the pentecostils and pupusas from my grandpa and my mommy and grandma.

I am from pray to God and things that are "imposibl" will happen because God is powerful. I am from "I am pentecostl and I'm not afraid to say it." I'm from the sweet county of A. and pupusas and tamales. From the resurection, the strong, and the guns. I'm from the brave family of the A. and R.

Elizabeth served as an example that students may become more proficient communicators when they write about issues that relate to place. By writing about issues to which they connect and about which they can offer firsthand information, they become experts. As experts, their use of language improves because they are not trying to fit their thoughts into a template that may not fit their type of expression. As well, Elizabeth's example revealed that students are successful communicators when they write about what they know rather than they trying to explain topics they don't understand or to which they don't connect.

### Community Connection

My second research question asked, "what community connections become evident when students engage in writing about their community." I assessed the samples through the students' indication of stewardship, shared practices, and social networks. I continued to use the essay and the "I am from...." poems as the major pieces of analysis.

I analyzed Tyrone's writing to show the impact of place-based writing practices on the writing of a student who struggles to connect to his community.

### The Class

The first assignment I analyzed was the essay. Through this assignment the students indicated how issues in North Carolina impacted their daily lives. They could choose to write about health care, education, immigration or environmental issues. This choice allowed them to pick the topic that most related to their daily life. Therefore, a connection to community was inherent to this assignment and as such all but one sample included examples of stewardship in their writing. Not only did the writing include examples of stewardship, but the samples also demonstrated the need to advocate for and take care of the people and land of their home communities. Through this assignment, the students evidenced a connection of government actions to their homes and families.

This is an example of stewardship and a connection to community taken from Caesar's work.

"Don't you think we should help our state be a better place for everyone?"

All samples included examples of shared practices and social networks. Through this idea of shared practices they also demonstrated that they understood how social networks could be conduits of change. The students showed signs of making direct plans for change and wrote statements that indicated change was needed. They asked questions that implied direct consequences and spoke about issues through stories that showed a personal connection to the issues

The "I am from..." poems provided the opportunity for the students to name their social networks and describe the impact they had on their lives. The writing delineated

the social networks inherent in family units and also explained the impact of those social networks. However, the samples did not show measures of stewardship as none of the students wrote about taking care of their family or community. Rather, the samples were written in the present tense indicating the direct consequence of the influence the community had on the students' lives. This assignment showed the students were able to connect to their community.

### Tyrone

Tyrone, an African American male, worked very hard to complete each assignment of the study. According to Mrs. Richardson hard work was not unusual for Tyrone because due to a learning disability he often struggled with his work. Every morning he came in for extra help to better understand simple tasks, such as the completion of worksheets. He was easily frustrated when he didn't understand the instructions of a task. Mrs. Richardson also explained that even though he lived with both of his parents, he often rebelled against his mother's protectiveness and that rebellion translated into his daily behaviors.

I asked him about writing and how he learned best.

"I learn by everything I hear. I also study. I am an aural learner and I like to study something above my level."

"I like it. I like to write poems. But I need the time to think about what my poem is going to be about and I don't really know about how they turn out, but sometimes I am told they are pretty good."

Overall his writing evidenced strong communication patterns in the understanding of grammatical conventions and the use of complex thoughts. What it lacked was a

connection to the community. Because of his learning disability, he can be socially detached and that disconnection was evident in his writing. I chose Tyrone's work to better understand how a curriculum with place as a primary component might help him connect with his home community and eventually the larger world.

Because I chose Tyrone's writing to show connection to community, I analyzed his writing based on the three categories of stewardship, shared practices, and social networks. His baseline assignment did not include any writing that showed a connection to community. The writing was really a collection of quotes from the text, some used incorrectly, interspersed with his own words. His writing demonstrated that while he may be able to choose facts from a passage, he may not completely comprehend their meaning or connection to the topic as a whole. However, in the last line, when he thanks the creators of rap and poetry, a sense of connection is evident. Through this mention of gratitude he showed an understanding of the impact of art on life.

#### Tyrone's Baseline One

I am going to tell you about rap and poetry. Did you know how to compare them? They actually aren't that different. If you can believe it?

Rap first gained popularity in the 1970's. Rap back then usually was telling stories rhythmically in the west African musicians. Centuries back then they created songs with just a beat of a drum.

Poetry is words that can rhyme or not. It is an expression and tells stories like rap does but doesn't do it with drums. Poesis is the Greek word for poetry.

Who ever created this I thank them because it can actually help me or other people let our thoughts and feelings out. I told you that rap and poetry might not be as different as you think.

In Baseline Two, Tyrone chose the topic of life to answer “My world is....” He explained the importance and meaning of his life and hinted at a conflict between survival and fun. Again, there is nothing which indicated a connection to community. There is no evidence of stewardship, shared practices, or social networks. The only mention of connection was when he lamented that his life might not be important to others. While other students connected their world to the people around them, he only recognized his own existence as central to the concept of his world.

#### Tyrone’s Baseline Two

My world is my life. Without my life I wouldn’t be alive and nothing else would be important. I need to survive but I also want to have fun. I don’t wanna die, I want to stay alive. My life might not be as important to other people. Either way i’m just another person, but my life is what makes me a person. My life is my existance.

For his essay topic, he chose to write about fracking. He read the material in class and was so intrigued that he went home and did more research on the internet. He came to class the next day with a concerned tone in his voice.

“Miss. Did you know that Main Street Middle School actually sits on land that could someday be used in fracking? What if we couldn’t drink the water anymore?”

When I read his essay, I began to see a transition from him writing from a position of isolation. He began to write instead with an understanding that context had an

impact on his life. For example, when he used facts from his writing they connected to make a point. This showed growth from his first essay assignment.

I applied the three categories to his writing, stewardship, shared practices, and social networks. A sense of stewardship was present when he advised the reader to say no to fracking. His writing explained the impact of the larger world on his life. He also revealed how might use writing to express his opinions. Shared practices such as needing oil and jobs showed that people need and do similar things. He also used the pronoun “we” and “our” for the first time in all his writing. Perhaps this was an indication of a comprehension of communal issues. However, other than that, there was still no evidence of social networks.

#### Tyrone’s Essay

North Carolina should say fracking is bad for the people and the land because fracking leads to nothing but destruction. What is fracking? Fracking is when companies drill the land to extract oil. I know we need oil for our cars and our lives but fracking is hurting the land.

There is a debate in North Carolina about this practice and I think we should all say no to fracking because it hurts the land and the people. But the businesses want fracking because it will make them lots of money and they will make lots of jobs. But I wonder do they know about the water that lights on fire because of all the pollution?

In conclusion, I am sad when I think about what fracking does to the earth. I understand that jobs and money are important but what will we do when the earth can’t support what we do to it. Maybe that’s something to think about too.

The last writing assignment prompted the students to directly connect with their communities. It allowed Tyrone to explore the relationships he held within his community and his family. He named and described various people in his life. In his last line, he brought up his difficulty in connecting to others appropriately due his learning disability. This showed an understanding of his unique personality.

However, this sample did not show signs of stewardship. Although he mentioned his religion and how it prevented him from “doing bad things” there was no indication that he felt responsibility towards his community. The growth that was evident in this sample is shown through his increased connection with his social networks and shared practices. He named those in his social networks as well as referenced his religious affiliation. He used adjectives such as “nice,” “helpful,” and “serene” to demonstrate his understanding of social expectations of his community.

When compared to the second baseline, where he used a voice that was isolated in his concept of identity, this writing showed a deeper understanding of the impact of his community. For a child who struggled with connections, this writing indicated his ability to find his family an important source of influence in his life.

Tyrone’s “I am from....”

I am from North Carolina, from fuel and technology. I am from the serene, working, and intelligent. I am from the poinsettias and the sunflower. I am from Christmas and intelligence, from grandma P. M., and papa Ben Mebane and papa E. M. I am from the nice and helpful. From potential and desire. I am from the Christian religion where I don’t do bad things. I am from G. and from my ancestors papa B. and grandma P., chicken and corn too. From the M’s, W. M.,



the popular, the intelligent and my mom S. M., the nice and helpful, I am from the middle of my mom and dad the memory photo of me in kindergarten for the first time, archives of me doing a report with enthusiasm and eye contact.

### Student Identity

To answer my third question, in what ways do place-based writing practices affect students' views of identity, community and agency, I analyzed the student writing samples according to the categories of social capital, patterns of self-understanding, and the expression of future expectations. As I analyzed the samples, I felt it important to further define what I meant by social capital and patterns of self-understanding. For the purposes of this study, social capital indicates that which provides students knowledge about their culture or the dominant culture (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Social capital is a function of identity because when students understand how to interact with society, they can better succeed (Nieto, 2002). For example, if the student learns how to use certain vocabulary that allows them to more effectively communicate within their culture that shows their development of social capital. That knowledge then can be used to further their position in either culture. On the other hand, self-understanding is that which helps the students better understand themselves as a result of their context. For example, if the student discovers a connection to their town that makes them proud of their heritage, that would help them better understand their value.

### The Class

This essay assignment was designed to support one of the primary components of this study. It helped codify how student identity, as informed by place, might be understood and explored through student writing. To answer this I first analyzed the

samples to ascertain signs of social capital. I found examples that showed students learned and wrote about their chosen issues in a way that provided knowledge to help them succeed in the larger society. They wrote about practices, new information, connections, and conclusions that helped them understand the issues that directly impacted their lives.

Their expression of self-understanding was evident because their voices developed a tone that was resilient and self-aware. They used their writing to advocate for themselves and showed a readiness to write for change. They reflected on how the issues might impact their lives and how that would make them feel. As well, they were able to use this assignment to show a connection both to their context and to the dominant context. For example, they could connect the teachers' protest in Raleigh to their own teacher and her working conditions. They were concerned about Mrs. Richardson and what the actions of the legislation might have on her position and her family. This revealed their ability to connect issues in the larger society to people in their own world.

The "I am from..." poems provided the opportunity for the students to describe their context. Their social capital extended from their mention of the newest technology to their use of slang and insider knowledge unique to their family. Many students wrote in both Spanish and English evidencing connections to both cultures.

This was taken from Omar's poem. He wrote of the home his family left in Mexico.

I am from Nayarit, from takis to tamales.

I am from the dry destert, I am from that one river oasis and from the prickly plants that sting.

Martha's writing shows how students used language as a marker of identity.

I am from novelas from Que probres tan ricos and lo que la vida mi robo.

Their patterns of self-understanding referenced physical characteristics, patterns of behavior, and emotions. Self-understanding is an essential component to building identity (Ross, 2003). By considering the origin of their actions, emotions, and behaviors they were able to better understand their ensuing identities. Overall, these poems allowed them to write in a way that showed a connection to their context, allowing them to be naturally expressive.

Cynthia

When evaluating students' writing as it showed changes in identity patterns, I chose Cynthia's writing. Cynthia was a Hispanic female who Mrs. Richardson described as being a very strong writer. She spent extra time at school as she participated in many of the offered extracurricular activities. She, like Elizabeth, is from a very religious family, although her family is Catholic. When she talked to me about her writing she said,

I like writing because you express yourself. Whenever you are writing, you are like, well you feel real freedom and you learn about yourself and you figure out some things when you write about them. You know I try to write in my personal journal twice a week. But I never write like that for school because you know that's all personal. It's like for me when I am trying to figure things out.

As an accelerated writer, she was an effective communicator. She did not have issues with grammatical conventions and turned in assignments that exceeded the expected length. Superficially, her writing left little to want. However she rarely wrote

in a way that revealed her own identity. As she said to me, she kept that writing to herself. I wondered if helping her connect to place might help unlock her voice and allow her to show patterns of identity in school assignments that previously she might have kept to herself. I used my categorical assignments of social capital, patterns of self-understanding, future expectations, connections to dominant culture, and connections to context to gauge changes in her writing.

Baseline one showed strong patterns of communication but as with the other students revealed little about her identity. The opening paragraph presented a situation that one could claim was a reference to her own context, when she was waiting in line to buy that new, hot rap CD, but this reference is fairly general and has no real connection to her home community.

#### Cynthia's Baseline One

Imagine you are waiting in line. Waiting to buy that new, hot rap CD. Now imagine that centuries ago that music was telling a story and people expressed their feelings just by a beat of a drum. On the other hand have you ever thought about telling your life story in a song? Well that's poetry. Believe it or not, poetry and rap aren't that different.

When you listen to poetry you often hear poets speaking fluently and with meaning. It can be powerful and it can be meaningful. Poetry was once called poesis in Greece and it was a way that people expressed themselves.

Rap is also a way that people express themselves. Rap started in West Africa as people pounded out rhythms on drums. People took that in the 1970s and started to use those rhythms to tell their own stories.

So rap and poetry are not that different afterall. They are both about telling stories and both are about expression. Are you surprised? So if you like poetry, guess what you might just like rap. Why not try it out!

In Baseline Two Cynthia wrote about music. Similar to her writing in Baseline One, she used questions to engage the reader. Although it was evident that she liked music, she doesn't tell the reader why she liked it. She simply explained that everything would be boring without it. There were no significant patterns of identity. Other than naming music as that which defined her world, she provided the reader very little insight into who she was and the things that were important to her.

#### Cynthia's Baseline Two

Music. Without music this world would be boring. Just imagine it without music. How would you feel knowing that you have a favorite song or genre. It would all be away and you wouldn't even know it. There would be no rythm or beat anywhere, everythings just blank and all you hear is nothing. There wouldn't be radios or stereos.

For her essay topic she decided to write about health care. She told Mrs. Richardson she chose this because she has a little sister who has asthma. She talked about how hard it was for her parents to manage the payments when her sister had to visit to the hospital. To write this essay she had to connect it to her own identity and her own place. The essay could not be completed without evidencing a piece of her identity because she had direct experience concerning its impact on her life.

This essay showed patterns of identity in the following ways. She began her essay with a story about her little sister which showed connections to dominant and

contextual culture. Her writing revealed social capital and patterns of self-understanding when she wrote about her situation and how it impacted her. Instead of writing down the facts, as she had in Baseline One, she presented the topic contextually through its effect on her family. Although she is not yet reflective about her own identity, she does allow the reader to know more about her contextual influences.

#### Cynthia's Essay

Health care is important for poor and sick people and should be something we deserve. My little sister has asma and my mom is worried about her. Imagine how you would feel. In an emergency room late at night, wondering if your little child is going to be ok and how you are going to pay her bills.

There is a debate about health care in the country but it is a debate that means a lot to me and my family. I want to believe that Obama has it all taken care of but I worry when I see my sister who needs a lot of help. The debate is whether everyone should have health care and how much it should cost. To me, I think that it should be affordable to everyone.

Have you ever thought about what would happen if there was an emergency and you didn't have money to pay for it? What's more important life or money? I hope my mom and dad never have to make that choice which is why we should all should have heath care in this country and this state.

In her last piece, the "I am from..." poem she created a picture of her home and her family. She describes her town as "small and unique" and told the reader that her home that is "warm and "cosy" in the winter but ice cold in the summer". She communicated effectively and helped the reader understand the facts of her situation.

However, I didn't feel as though she stretched herself to reveal as much about her identity as she did in her essay. She reported aspects of her situation without revealing her feelings. However, when compared to Baseline Two she did show growth. Her social capital was derived from aspects of her home, town, and family. She explained that she was a blessing and a creation from God, and that everything happens for a reason. This context delineated the origin of her patterns of self-understanding. She did not show any future plans but this was a trend seen throughout the samples.

#### Cynthia's "I am from..." poem

I am from small and unique town of G. North Carolina. I am from a small home that is warm and cosy in the winter but ice cold in the summer. My home is in an old town but has a new feel to it. I am from the state with a cardinal as the state bird and dogwood as the state tree. I am from the family that celebrates quincenera, Christmas, and thanksgiving. My family trait is light skin from both my mom and my dad's side, R. and M.

I am from the family that has a tendency to be loud and to cook and eat Italian food. From me being told I am a blessing and creation from God, and everything happens for a reason. I was born in B., NC but my family ancestors are Hispanic, Italian and white descent. I am from tortillas and pasta, I am proud of where I am from.

#### Agency

When I first coded the assignments, I included agency, defined for the purposes of this study as that which indicates the authentic practice of working to change or advocate for a place or situation based on one's values and priorities. However, a sense of agency

was absent in all samples in the two baselines. As students worked through the units, it only became apparent in the essays where they wrote about their community and their world. So, I can only comment on what I saw in their writing and what they spoke to me about in their interviews, but I cannot comment on whether this was a point of growth or change. Also because agency did not extend itself in a meaningful way in their final assignment, I could not conclude that the students' sense of advocacy would be a lasting effect of this study.

The advocacy I did observe was divided into several categories. First, students wrote many "should" statements; statements with good intentions but no plans or suggestions for direct actions. The writing also evidenced social capital. However, this did not directly translate into actions which would indicate agency. In a way they were suggesting that they knew action was needed, but they weren't actually suggesting that they should be the ones to do it.

Students also developed a sense of protection about their home town and school. Again, their tone reflected a sense of stewardship showing they wanted to advocate for their school but there were no direct plans to make change, which is the primary indicator for agency.

As I reflected on the process as a whole, I had to argue that the very nature of this study encouraged agency. Students learned that they mattered, that their communities were important, and that they could be agents of change. I spoke to several students about their agency as students and what they thought their education should look like. In these statements the students were advocates for change and seemed to know what changes were needed to increase their success as students. These responses helped



reinforce the idea that even though there was no strong baseline assessment, the students did develop a sense of agency because the assignments allowed them to write their about their lives, which helped reinforce the idea that they were valued and their opinions and voices were important (Cruddas, 2007).

### Summary

This study was guided by three main questions.

- (1) What happens to student writing when place-based education practices are introduced?
- (2) What community connections become evident through student writing?
- (3) In what ways does place-based education affect students' views of identity, community, and agency?

The first question assessed development in student writing. The second questioned changes in community connections. The third evaluated student identities and community advocacy. I found that student writing improved in length, complexity, and grammatical conventions when students were allowed to write about what they know. Their writers' voices sounded more natural and less contrived. Although they struggled with the format of the essay, they wrote with more proficiency and motivation because they connected with the subject of their writing.

Students showed more of a connection to their community, a connection that honestly assessed their home communities. When they described things about their home community that were not entirely positive, they did so protectively, with a voice of advocacy. This helped define their identities. Throughout the eight weeks of the study, markers of identity were revealed through their writing. The students wrote with an

understanding of their social capital while connecting their future aspirations to the dominant and contextual cultures. They told stories, asked questions, and shared anecdotes about themselves and their families. They wrote about their activities, their hopes, and their fears. Their honesty was at times shocking and other times touching. In summary, they wrote with more proficiency with a sense of expertise that was developed due to a curriculum based on place.

## CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

“This thing that is unique about my town is people. Every place has different people.”  
Martha, 7<sup>th</sup> grader

### Overview

Rural education matters. In 2009 over 10.5 million children attended rural schools (Lester, 2012). These students and their respective communities contend with poverty, poor educational resources, and a sapping of local talent as students leave their communities for the economic opportunities in urban communities (Budge, 2006; Epstein, 2007; Lester, 2012). Students struggle to fit in, changing their identities to emulate what they see in the dominant culture while knowing little about their home contexts (Corbett, 2009; Sobel, 2005). Teachers struggle to teach standardized curriculum and comply with district expectations while they attempt to meet the needs of their disparate students (Corbett, 2009; Malhoit, 2005). In the middle school, writing instruction is lost between the pages of tested subjects, discipline issues, and expectations of accountability (Applebee & Langer, 2012).

However, when students learn to value the places from which they are from their writing changes (Azano, 2011). They write about what they know, developing a voice of expertise. They write using words and grammatical conventions that they understand, rather than write trying to fit their ideas into a foreign template. Their writers’ voices

become less contrived and they find it easier to write longer pieces that reveal greater understanding of the topics addressed. They begin to connect to these topics because they can appreciate their real world implications. When classroom discussions revolve around place, students become the experts and realize that their writing matters.

This study was designed to add to the existing literature surrounding rural studies, writing instruction, place-based education practices, and the building of student identity, community connections, and agency. Using the theoretical framework of critical pedagogy of place as conceptualized by Gruenewald (2003), I worked with Mrs. Richardson, my cooperating teacher, to design the unit plans which incorporated the best practices of place-based education in the increasingly standardized modern classroom. The goal of the instruction was to improve student writing skills while helping them understand and express their identity through learning about the importance of their home community.

To better understand people, one must begin with an understanding of place (Bishop, 2004; Esposito, 2012). Place matters because it is the underlying story of who we are, our motivations, and the impact we have on others. The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of place-based writing practices on rural middle school student identity while working to better understand the cultural connections that may become evident through their writing. I organized the analysis around three research questions which guided my questioning and my coding process.

- (1) What happens to student writing when place-based education writing practices are introduced?
- (2) What community connections become evident when students engage in writing about their community?
- (3) In what ways do place-based writing practices affect students' views of identity, community, and agency?

Chapter Four used thematic and content analysis in concert to create a coding system that demonstrated how place-based writing practices influenced students. Writing samples were analyzed through three basic sets of codes. The sets were focused on writing practices, community connections, and markers of identity. Two groups of writing samples labeled Baseline One and Baseline Two were used to examine the skills and understandings inherent in student writing prior to the introduction of place-based writing practices. This chapter also explained the flow and activities of the units. To analyze the writing, the samples were analyzed both as an aggregate and through the work of individual students.

Chapter Five discusses the implications of the findings of the data analysis. I begin this chapter with a summary of the findings of my data analysis. I then explore the impact of the results of this study, its limitations and possibilities for future research. The chapter concludes with a personal reflection.

#### Summary of Findings

This core of this study was to investigate whether or not place-based writing practices would impact student writing. Analyzing student writing through its conventions, apparent connections, and patterns of identity provided an opportunity to

describe the impact of place-based writing practices. What I found was that when the students wrote about place their writing changed. Because they were allowed to write about subjects they understood and connected to, they become more effective communicators. They related to their community in a way which showed they understood the importance of its impact on their lives. They began to write about who they were in the context of place, revealing pride about their community, family, and self.

When students write about where they are from, they write from a point of expertise. This provides a confidence that translates into their writing style. They are more effective communicators because they write like they speak when they are talking about what matters most. Their grammar and the complexity of their writing improve because they are concerned more about *what* they are saying rather than *how* they are saying it. Therefore, when students begin their writing from a conversation about place they are more effective and authentic communicators.

Student writing matters. This became apparent in my time at Main Street Middle School. Students were able to communicate effectively through writing practices allowing them to become experts. When the students were engaged in authentic activities that mattered to them, not only did their writing improve, but their classroom behavior changed. The teacher became less of a manager and much more of a mentor. She had time to talk to her students rather than just assess and manage them. However, this study also showed the realities of the rural classroom with its overworked teachers, who are burnt out, teaching students who are held to standards taught through a mandated curriculum that does not match students' needs.

This study was designed to gauge the changes in rural middle school student writing in three areas: student writing, student community connections, and student identity and advocacy. Through content and thematic analysis, the data was coded to explain changes that became apparent in the writing. The codes were based on ideas found in literature, commonalities in student and teacher interviews, and patterns found in the writing itself.

When assessing changes in writing, the samples were coded based on length of writing, use of grammatical conventions, and an understanding author's purpose and genre (Applebee & Langer, 2012). Social capital and traditional communication patterns were also attributes that were important in improving student writing skills (Smith & Sobel, 2010). The writing samples included both creative and academic writing. When comparing the two academic pieces, the Baseline One and the community/world essay, their writing, according to the matrix of this study, improved. Students were able to write longer pieces and they had fewer issues with grammatical conventions and sentence structure. By the second essay, issues such as capitalization and simple punctuation which prior to the study had been a main focus for Mrs. Richardson were rectified. Nineteen samples were at or above expectations for length compared to 11 in the baseline assessment. Students also wrote with more complexity, which may indicate a greater connection with and comprehension of their topic. For example, this was a sentence I considered above expectations in the baseline assessment:

“Centuries ago music could tell a story and express a feeling with just the beat of a drum.”

This is an example of a complex thought in the community/world essay.

“Health care is important for poor and sick people and should be something they deserve.”

The second sample includes a sense of agency and moves beyond a recitation of facts to a critical statement that is indicative of higher level thinking.

When coding the creative prompts, those which allowed a greater freedom of expression, the writing also improved although on a different level. The first baseline assessment allowed students to answer prompts. When they wrote, they did so motivated by the assignment itself rather than the grade they might receive for their work. There were improvements in the grammatical conventions and length of the writing, but the real improvement was in the way they wrote. They became critical and honest about their situations. Even in this honesty, they developed a protective voice that employed critical thinking to accurately describe their situations. Above all, their writing demonstrated complex thoughts evidencing a critical thought process about themselves and their context.

One writing issue that was referenced in Applebee and Langer’s work (2012), understanding author’s purpose and genre, did not show any significance in this study. In all the writing assignments, students wrote with an understanding of the purpose and genre of the assignment. Perhaps this is due to Mrs. Richardson’s explicit teaching, but there was no change in this category. In future research, I might exclude this category.

For the purposes of this study, community was defined through the evidence of social networks (Ludden, 2011), employing a shared set of practices (Kelly, 2009) that develop a sense of stewardship (Anzano, 2009). The connections to community were



shown through the students' writings about activities, relationships, and community values. Their feelings about the community waivered from the first prompt where they wrote fondly about their small but friendly town to the second, more focused set of prompts that pushed the students to think honestly about their community. It was in this set of prompts that issues with economic opportunities, things to do, and the limits of size became apparent. However, after students learned more about their town and debated the merits of their school, they became protective and indicated that if people didn't like their town it was more because they didn't understand it than because of its shortcomings.

Identity was defined through the development of social capital, self-understanding, and contextual connections. Alex said it best when he wrote, "image is everything." Perhaps he understood that student identity is transitory. They are often "trying on" various personas to better adapt to their present situation (Esposito, 2012; Haas, 1991; Wake, 2009). In order to capture how place-based writing practices affect students' views of their identity, the struggle to understand their own identity must be discussed. That idea of identity then affects how they interact with their community while enacting a sense of agency. Providing them a base rooted in their home community helps promote a self-awareness that has stability and is supported by the members of that community (Jacobs, 2011; Wigginton, 1991). When students write about real life, they feel empowered with a voice of expertise that allows them to demonstrate their social capital while supporting their understanding of identity (Esposito, 2012).

## Implications

This study argued that writing about place-based writing practices helps empower rural students, allowing them connect to their home communities while demonstrating a greater understanding of their identities. Historically, many of the examples of place-based projects have been focused on one aspect of community, such as the collection of oral history, or have taken place outside of or in place of the mandated curriculum. However, in the standards based classroom, this is no longer practical, as teachers must spend the majority of their time implementing mandated curriculum to better prepare students for their required tests. This study attempted to increase the importance of writing in the curriculum and the utility of place-based practices by integrating them into the standardized curriculum.

The primary purpose of this study was to describe how rural middle school student writing changed when place-based writing practices were employed. This study indicated that place-based writing practices can effectively be used to supplement and enhance a standardized curriculum to better serve the needs of students while improving their writing skills. It also demonstrated that students could learn to explore their identities through writing assignments informed by place. Writing about what they know helped the students better engage in the classroom activities. When students were engaged in meaningful assignments, I saw an improvement in their behavior as well as a change in the teaching methods as the classroom became more student focused. This lends credibility to the understanding that writing is important to student development, and when taught through place-based writing practices, students can become better, more informed writers.

### Future Research Recommendations

This case study questioned the feasibility and results of adding place-based writing practices into a rural middle school classroom that employed a standard-based curriculum. This study focused on the changes that were evident in student writing. The results are not generalizable, as is typical of a case study, but the insight I gained provided a starting point for further research in this area. I observed changes in student behaviors and teaching methods. Although I mentioned them in my narrative, they technically were outside of the parameters of the study. Thus, both areas warrant further research. As well, because this was a case study, the sample size and scope was limited. I would like to develop a longitudinal study to follow a group of students through their three middle school years, employing a place-based writing curriculum to better support their writing, identity, community connections, and sense of agency. Other researchers may want to implement place-based writing practices in other content classrooms, grade levels, and other types of educational environments.

To extend place-based education practices outside the subject of writing, a study focusing on improving reading comprehension and motivation would be a natural companion to the first study. This could be completed qualitatively through small guided reading groups and quantitatively through the collection of standard test scores.

Rural education matters because their interests are unique to their communities. (Kelly, 2009). If the character and values of the community are not understood, the students suffer from mandated practices that may not best suit their disparate needs (Azano, 2011). Rural students constitute a significant number of students in the United States and their issues are unique (Gruenwald, 2003). They must make life choices that

may require leaving their home communities for educational or economic opportunities. Research should be available both for the practitioner, to better support and guide the teachers, and for the academic, to allow them to use their voice to support rural communities through the increased funding and stronger political presence. As this study illustrates, where we are from matters.

### Reflections

This study was intended to question whether place-based writing practices might be effectively received and reflected through student writing. I wanted to help students connect to their communities while they learned to better understand their identities. When I began this study, I wanted to see growth in student writing, even though at the time I didn't really know how I might define growth. But as an educator in the modern standards based, data informed classroom, growth seems to be what educators seek to enact. When I looked at the analyzed data, I saw growth in definable terms, according to those delineated categories of the study. For example, students wrote longer pieces and their use of grammatical conventions improved. They began to write with more complexity in their sentence structure and thought processes. If writing is conceptualized through a standardized sense of education, this study demonstrated that place-based writing practices could positively impact student writing while enacting a sense of growth as students become more proficient writers.

However, this idea of growth seemed a bit hollow when I conceptualized the change I found in the students' writing, sense of self, and patterns of connection with their community. Over the eight weeks of this study, students were given time to write about what they knew. They learned about their own place and took ownership of issues

that directly affected their community and family. A protective element became evident in their writing as they admitted that where they live may not be exciting or fun or brand new, but it was where they lived and that was what made it substantial and important. Especially when they wrote about their school, they stood up for it, trying to get others to see that special spark they found undeniable. They began to show that they understood that their voices could be used to impact misconceptions, working in defense of their place.

The sound and nature of their writing changed. It became less forced and lost the formulaic nature that so often accompanies prescriptive adolescent writing. As they wrote, they worked with their table mates, smiling, questioning, and talking authentically. In this, I saw growth. They were excited when they saw me in class and by the end of the eight weeks were excited to show me their newest writing pieces.

Even though pedagogy was not a focus of this study, I find it important to note that the nature of the teaching changed. Mrs. Richardson had space to work with her students one on one. She had the opportunity to talk with her students. They interviewed her, listened to her stories, asked her personal questions, and heard her read the poetry she wrote. There were fewer names on the board and far fewer moments of redirection. The students were on-task without being asked. They were proud of their work, and the questions they asked indicated they had an authentic desire to understand the assignment.

Chance was a student that often struggled with the school's discipline expectations. One afternoon he was sent to Mrs. Richardson's classroom after misbehaving in another classroom. He walked directly over to the file box where we kept the student notebooks. He took out his notebook and flipped to the page where he started

his “I am from....” poem. He began to write in a frantic manner. He looked up at me at one point and shot his hand in the air. I walked over to him and he asked, “Is this good?”

He wrote:

I am from people who don't get me.

I am from teachers who yell at me for something I never did.

But they don't know where I am really from.

I am from cars and oil and engines and funny brothers who fight with me, but just playing.

I am from all the food that my mom used to make but don't anymore because she left.

I am from a nice teacher to.

She lets me do what I want to do and don't yell to much.

I am from my dad and I really love him.

This writing shows the possibilities of place-based writing practices. Learning about place enables students to become experts. Writing about home provides time to write about ourselves, our frustrations, our triumphs, our sorrows, and our grief. The students I worked with took advantage of this opportunity. Through their writing they talked about life at home and the hopes of their parents. They talked about the shortcomings of their town and how they wished it were different while at the same time they defended it, making sure that people knew it was just misunderstood. They learned

about important issues in the world and how a small vote in Congress could make big changes in real people's lives. But perhaps most importantly, they learned about themselves.

I am from G.

And from the Major league.

I am from the brick house

I am from dogs and their bark.

I am from the beach and curiosity from April and Keith and the strong.

I am from the surely

And intelligent

From the woods and south

I am from Jesus.

I am from England

And pig meat

From the war and almost loss of arm.

I am from home and that's the most valued.

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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

## Teacher Interview Protocol

## Teacher Interview I: Semi-Structured

## Ice breakers

My name is Erin and I would like to talk to you today about your classroom. You only have to answer the questions you want to and if there is anything you don't want me to use in my project, please let me know.

I would like to get to know you first so,

Where are you from?

(depending on the answer..) why did you move to this community?

Have you ever considered living anywhere else?

Tell me a little bit about your life outside of school.

Why did you decide to go into teaching?

## Curriculum

I am trying to learn how best to teach so I am going to ask some questions about your classroom. Together we can pick activities that would best fit you, your teaching style and your students.

Tell me about your classroom?

How is it set up?

What are daily expectations?

Talk to me about how you structure a class?

What are the positives about your classroom?

What are some things you would like to change?

Tell me about your students.

How do you think they learn best?

What would you like to do to help them?

What are the demographics of your classroom?

Are there any students you struggle to teach?

Talk to me about how you plan your classroom.

Do you work with a plc?

What resources do you use?

Is there a standard lesson plan you are required to use?

If so, tell me about it.

If not, talk to me about the lesson plan format you use.

What about the standard course of study? How do you use it to plan?

What are your principal's expectations?

Talk to me about your students' writing.

What assessment practices have you used?

Do they keep a portfolio?

How do you think they could grow as writers?

Community

Talk to me about this community?

What is your favorite thing about living in this town?

What is the best thing to eat here?

Do you have a favorite place to go?

Are there ever any celebrations or festivals that take place in this town?

What is the most exciting thing that happens?

What are your ideas for reaching out to the community?

Are there people in the community you would like to have come into your classroom?

Wrap up

Is there anything else you would like to talk about?

Thank you so much for your time today.

#### Teacher interview II: Semi-Structured

Check in

I wanted to meet briefly to check in and make sure you were comfortable with everything happening in your class.

Talk to me about the successes you have seen.

Tell me about things we should change going forward.

Talk to me about the students' writing.

Are there any resources that you don't have that might help the students become more successful?

Are there any community resources we are missing?

Talk to me about any change you see in your classroom.

How is this change in curriculum affecting your work with other teachers in the building?

I am so happy we could talk today.

Is there anything else you would like to talk about?

Thank you so much for your time today.

#### Teacher Interview III (Final): Unstructured

I want this interview to be unstructured so the teacher can speak freely about her experience.

I want to address the following issues in our conversation:

1. Teacher practice
  - a. Classroom culture and management
  - b. Ease of curriculum to implement
  - c. Issues with other teachers in the building (if there are any)
  - d. Future implications for her practice
2. Student connection to curriculum, the classroom, and community
  - a. Student writing, what the teacher sees in her students writing
  - b. Student behavior and identity practices

### 3. Community

- a. How this changed her own views about her community
- b. How she would extend place based education to work with other issues in the community
- c. What other problems that may be important to solve in the community

#### Student interview

##### Ice breakers

My name is Erin and I would like to talk to you today about you and how you feel about some things we are doing in class. You only have to answer the questions you want to and if there is anything you don't want me to use in my project, please let me know.

I would like to get to know you first so,

Tell me a little bit about this school year.

Tell me about your life outside of school.

##### Curriculum

I am trying to learn how best to teach writing so I am going to ask some questions about school.

Talk to me about how you learn best in school.

Tell me about how you feel about writing.

Is writing something you like to do? Why or why not?

We have been working on writing activities in class, talk to me about the one you like best.

Is there one you think we might change the next time we do it? How would you change it?

##### Community

Tell me about living in your home community.

Talk to me about the things you like to do outside of school.

Is there anything you would change about where you live?

## APPENDIX B: LESSON PLANS

Table 1: Week one

	DAY ONE	DAY TWO
Learning Target (LT)	LT: Students will express themselves through answering writing prompts.	LT: Students will analyze their lives through a SWOT analysis.
Common Core connection	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
Teacher input	The teacher will answer one prompt. She will share that writing with the kids. Then she will explain the centers that are placed around the classroom.	Teacher will introduce the SWOT analysis chart. She will lead a discussion answering: So why do you think it's important to think about our own lives?
Student participation	Students will complete the prompts at the stations in their student notebooks. They will stop and share three different times during the lesson. The listener will provide a "ticket" to ensure they are engaged listeners while providing motivation to the writer.	Students will fill out a SWOT analysis chart, reflecting on their lives. They may fill out the chart in words and may illustrate each box. This will be done in their student notebooks.
Identify student success	Students will be successful if they can: 1.Complete their prompts. 2.Participate as engaged listeners by filling out a ticket.	Students will be successful if they can: 1.Understand the meaning of each category. 2.Reflect on their lives and represent their experiences in writing on the chart.
Materials	Prompts, tickets	SWOT chart and SWOT poster

## PREP ACTIVITY ONE

The students will answer: My world is...

## PREP ACTIVITY TWO

The students will design a cover for their student notebook.

Table 2: Week two

Learning Target (LT)	DAY ONE LT: Students will learn how to write effective interview questions.	DAY TWO LT: Students will reflect on their interviews and begin to plan their reflection pieces.	DAY THREE LT: Today the students will create their reflection pieces. They will critique their work based on the rubric.
Common Core connection	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.5 With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on how well purpose and audience have been addressed.	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.
Teacher input	The teacher will start the lesson by guiding the students through their KWL chart. The students will brainstorm everything they know about the person they plan to interview. They will use this information to complete the personal sketch. Then, working with a partner, the students will brainstorm everything they want to know about the person.	Teacher will start the lesson with a read aloud interview. Students will practice critiquing and questioning the interview. She will explain the peer conferencing system. After the students have spent time sharing their work, they will begin to plan their reflection piece. Teacher will pass out the rubric and explain their choices.	The teacher will review the reflection piece assignment and ask students to turn and talk to their partner to explain their piece. Teacher will monitor students' progress.



Table 2: (continued)

Student active participation	Students will fill out a KWL chart and use it to create a personal sketch and write ten interview questions. They will be expected to finish the interview for homework.	Students will share their interviews and critique the interviews of their peers. Then they will plan their reflection piece based on the requirements of the rubric.	Students will work on their reflection pieces and will critique them when they are finished.
Identify student success	Students will be successful if they can: 1.Fill out the KWL chart and use it to inform their questions. 2. Fill out the KWL chart and use it to build a personal sketch.	Students will be successful if they can: 1.Share and critique their interviews. 2.Understand the rubric and use it to plan their reflection piece. Teacher will assess their interviews for completion.	Students will be assessed through their reflection pieces using the same rubric the students used.
Materials needed	KWL chart, interview question sheet, and personal sketch sheet	Critique tickets, rubric, reflection piece choices	Rubric

**PREP ACTIVITY:**

Students will investigate the roots of their town through oral history collection. The students' task is to choose someone they would like to interview.

**POST ACTIVITY:**

For homework students will use the information from their interview project and fill out the final column in their KWL chart.

Table 3: Week three

Learning Target (LT)	DAY ONE LT: Our School is... Students will collect details about their school.	DAY TWO LT: Our School is... Students will create a persuasive brochure advertising their favorite aspect of the school.	DAY THREE LT: Our school is... Students will brainstorm opportunities at their school and develop solutions to problems.
Common core connection	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.1a Introduce claim(s), acknowledge alternate or opposing claims, and organize the reasons and evidence logically. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.1b Support claim(s) with logical reasoning and relevant evidence, using accurate, credible sources and demonstrating an understanding of the topic or text.	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.1a Introduce claim(s), acknowledge alternate or opposing claims, and organize the reasons and evidence logically. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.1b Support claim(s) with logical reasoning and relevant evidence, using accurate, credible sources and demonstrating an understanding of the topic or text.	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.1a Introduce claim(s) about a topic or issue, acknowledge and distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and organize the reasons and evidence logically. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.1b Support claim(s) with logical reasoning and relevant, accurate data and evidence that demonstrate an understanding of the topic or text, using credible sources.
Teacher input	The teacher will take the students on a walking tour of the school. She will explain how to observe and collect details using the collection sheet. Students will collect sensory data.	The teacher will help students plan their brochure based on the information they collected the day prior. They will choose one thing about the school they want the world to know and write a persuasive brochure.	The teacher will start the student brainstorming session. Students will brainstorm opportunities at their school and then discuss them as a whole class. They will fill out the solution chart, working with a small group to develop their plan.
Student active participation	Students will collect details about their school on their collection sheet.	Students will plan and create their brochure.	Students will brainstorm. They will fill out their solution sheets in order to better participate.

Table 3: (continued)

Identify student success	Students will be successful if they can: 1. Complete the note sheet showing an understanding of data collection.	Students will be successful if they can: 1. Use details from their walk to plan a brochure. 2. Use persuasive language. 3. Create a brochure that shows good use of grammar, sentence structure and a creative approach.	Students will be assessed through the completion of their solution charts and their participation in the brainstorming session and the class discussion
Materials needed	Data collection sheet	Planning sheet, extra paper, art supplies	Solution chart

Table 4: Week four

Learning Target (LT)	DAY ONE LT: My town is... Students will create an argument for their town.	DAY TWO LT: My town is... Students will create research briefs to help them learn about their town.
Common core connection	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.1a Introduce claim(s), acknowledge alternate or opposing claims, and organize the reasons and evidence logically.	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.1b Support claim(s) with logical reasoning and relevant evidence, using accurate, credible sources and demonstrating an understanding of the topic or text.
Teacher input	Teacher will give directions to students for using the stations. She will monitor the stations as students move from prompt to prompt. She will also facilitate the conversation after the stations are completed. Students will answer prompts and then the teacher will facilitate a whole class discussion: What are we proud of in our community? Why?	The teacher will explain the research brief process to the students. She will monitor their work to make sure they are choosing details that can be transferred to their persuasive essays.
Student active participation	Students will answer prompts reacting to other students' responses. They will also participate in a discussion.	Students will visit the stations. At each station they will complete a research brief, collecting details they can use in their persuasive essays.
Identify student success	Students will be successful if they can: 1. Answer prompts. 2. React to the answers of other students.	Students will be successful if they can: 1. Read the passages and choose information that describes the main ideas. 2. Take the information and categorize it in their research briefs.
Materials needed	Prompts that are organized in centers and pride posters	Research brief worksheet and information about their town

Table 4: (continued)

Learning Target (LT)	DAY THREE LT: My town is... Students will use the evidence they collect on Monday and Tuesday to plan and write a persuasive essay.	DAY FOUR LT: My town is.... Students will begin to write their persuasive essay.
Common Core Connection	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.1a Introduce claim(s), acknowledge alternate or opposing claims, and organize the reasons and evidence logically. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.1b Support claim(s) with logical reasoning and relevant evidence, using accurate, credible sources and demonstrating an understanding of the topic or text.	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.1a Introduce claim(s) about a topic or issue, acknowledge and distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and organize the reasons and evidence logically. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.1b Support claim(s) with logical reasoning and relevant, accurate data and evidence that demonstrate an understanding of the topic or text, using credible sources.
Teacher input Teacher directed portion	Teacher will introduce the essay planning sheet to the students. She will help them: 1. Write a thesis (topic) sentence. 2. Plan their three arguments, adding evidence where necessary. 3. Plan an counter argument (if the students are able). 4. Plan a conclusion.	The teacher will help the students transfer their plans into actual writing. Students will be given the rubric to better write and critique their work.
Student active participation	Students will plan their essays using the planning sheet, utilizing the information they collected.	Students begin to write their essays.
Identify student success	Students will be successful if they can: Plan their essay, creating a topic sentence, planning and supporting with evidence three arguments, creating a counter argument (possibly) and planning a conclusion.	Students will be assessed through the completion of their essay. They will also be given a chance to assess their own writing.
Materials needed	Planning sheet, notes from Monday and Tuesday	Prior day's planning sheet and rubric

Table 5: Week five

Learning Target (LT)	DAY ONE LT: North Carolina is... Students will create research briefs to help them learn about issues in the state of North Carolina.	DAY TWO LT: North Carolina is... Students will choose one issue they read about and fill out an opinion sheet to help prepare for the debate.	DAY THREE LT: North Carolina is... Students will use their opinion sheets to debate the issues.
Common core connection	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.1b Support claim(s) with logical reasoning and relevant evidence, using accurate, credible sources and demonstrating an understanding of the topic or text.	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.1a Introduce claim(s), acknowledge alternate or opposing claims, and organize the reasons and evidence logically. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.1b Support claim(s) with logical reasoning and relevant evidence, using accurate, credible sources and demonstrating an understanding of the topic or text.	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.1a Introduce claim(s) about a topic or issue, acknowledge and distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and organize the reasons and evidence logically. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.3 Delineate a speaker's argument and specific claims, evaluating the soundness of the reasoning and the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.
Teacher input	The teacher will explain the research brief process. She will monitor their work to make sure they are choosing details that can be transferred to their preparation sheet.	Teacher will introduce the opinion sheet to the students. She will help them use evidence to strengthen their opinions.	The teacher will serve as the moderator of the debate. Students will either debate or observe. When they are finished, they will fill out a reflection sheet.
Student active participation	Students will visit the stations. They will collect information on research sheets.	Students will fill out their opinion sheets using the evidence they collected the day before.	Students will debate, observe and reflect.

Table 5: (continued)

Identify student success	Students will be successful if they can: 1. Read the passages and choose information that helps describe the main ideas of the information. 2. Categorize the information in their research briefs.	Students will be successful if they can: 1.Explain their opinion using the evidence they collected.	Students will be assessed through their debates, their observations, and their reflections. They should be able to compose an argument based on a well-formed opinion that is informed by evidence.
Materials needed	Research brief worksheet and North Carolina passages	Opinion sheet, research briefs	Prior day's opinion sheet, observation sheet, reflection sheet

\*This lesson was changed from a debate to an essay. See description in chapter four.

Table 6: Week six

Learning Target (LT)	DAY ONE LT: Pride is... Students will read around the room to better understand the idea of pride.	DAY TWO LT: Pride is... Students will complete a pre-writing activity that will help them write their <i>I Am From</i> poems.	Thursday LT: Students will complete, illustrate and share their <i>I Am From</i> poems.
Common core connection	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.9 Compare and contrast texts in different forms or genres in terms of their approaches to similar themes and topics.	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.3d Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to capture the action and convey experiences and events.	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.3d Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to capture the action and convey experiences and events.
Teacher input	The teacher will start the class by reading her own <i>I Am From</i> poem. She will explain the centers and how the students will use the pride collection sheet. She will facilitate the centers.	The teacher will help the students fill out their brainstorming sheets. She may show use her brainstorming sheet as a mentor text.	The teacher will help students fill out the planning sheet. They will rewrite their poems on the <i>I Am From</i> poem sheet and illustrate them.
Student active participation	Students will read around the room, collecting information from the poems that may inspire their own work.	Students will use the brainstorming sheet to help plan their poems.	Students will fill out the planning sheets and then rewrite their poems.



Table: 6 (continued)

Identify student success	Students will be successful if they can: 1. Collect details from the poems that help define the idea of pride.	Students will be successful if they can: 1. Complete their prewriting activities.	Students will be assessed through the completion and illustration of their poems.
Materials needed	Pride collection sheet	Brainstorming sheet	Planning sheet, poem page

Table 7: Week seven

	DAY ONE	DAY TWO
Learning Target (LT)	LT: Advocacy is.... Students will read around the room about athletes and musicians who have helped their communities in order to define <i>advocacy</i> .	LT: Advocacy is... Students will define advocacy through their own life stories.
Common core connection	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.7.1 Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.2b Develop the topic with relevant facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples.
Teacher input	The teacher will choose one story to read aloud to the class. She will help the students understand why this story is an example of advocacy, preparing them to formulate their own definitions.	The teacher will facilitate a discussion that defines <i>advocacy</i> . The students will then write the story of their future selves as they return to the community and act as advocates.
Student active participation	Students will read the stories about athletes and musicians, compiling details to help them define <i>advocacy</i> .	Students will define <i>advocacy</i> and then write a fictional story about their lives as advocates.
Identify student success	Students will be successful if they can: 1.Find details in the texts to help create a definition of <i>advocacy</i> .	Students will be successful if they can: 1.Access the information they collected to define <i>advocacy</i> and then demonstrate an understanding through the creation of a stories that depict them acting as advocates.
Materials needed	Note taking sheet	My story...

Table 8: Week eight

Learning Target (LT)	DAY ONE	DAY TWO
Common core connection	LT: My future is...choice Students will brainstorm what they want their future to look like.	LT: My world is... Students will answer the prompt to reflect on changes in their world.
Teacher input Teacher directed portion	The teacher will read the “When I grow up” article to the kids. Then she will share her own brainstorming sheet. She may take the stance of “this is what I thought when I was your age” or “this is the future I see for myself now.” Students will then work on their brainstorming sheets.	The teacher will read her answer to my world is. She will facilitate the discussion regarding how the students have changed. She will also facilitate the “celebration.”
Student active participation	Students will complete the brainstorming sheets.	Students will answer the “my world is” prompt.
Identify student success	Students will be successful if they can: 1.Creatively describe their future selves.	Students will be successful if they can: 1.Answer the prompt using their experiences.
Materials Needed	Brainstorming sheet	“My world is” sheet

## APPENDIX C: DATA

Table 1: What happens to student writing when place-based education practices are introduced?

<b>Writing</b>	Baseline 1	Baseline 2	Family	Community and World	Identity					
<b>Length</b>										
Below expectations	12	0	4	4	0					
At expectations	7	20	10	9	15					
Above expectations	4	3	9	10	8					
<b>Grammar Conventions</b>										
Overall the writing sample was:	13	9	10	9	3					
Below expectations										
At expectations						9	12	6	6	8
Above expectations						1	3	7	7	12
<b>Complex thoughts</b>										
Average number of complex thoughts per writing sample	Most students wrote using simple sentence structure	Each student wrote at least 1 complex sentence	2 per sample	4 per sample	5 per sample					
<b>Traditional communication patterns (TCP)</b>										
Number of samples that included TCP	3	5	4	2	23 (including use of home languages)					
<b>Audience and Purpose (a and p)</b>	see examples	All wrote to a and p.	Most wrote to a and p.	All wrote to a and p.	All wrote to a and p.					

Table 2: Descriptive examples

<b>Baseline 1</b>	
Grammar Conventions	
Below expectations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. the think about poetry is that it can tell a story about a person lives.</li> <li>2. when you listen to poetry you here poets talking?</li> <li>3. So when you here a poet singing his poem you wont here him talking about sex.</li> </ol>
At expectations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Since the day people could talk we had stories or songs.</li> <li>2. Do you think the world might be different?</li> <li>3. Did you ever wonder where rap started?</li> </ol>
Above expectations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. People think that rap is all "bad" but really it is a hard core version of poetry.</li> <li>2. Have you ever let it cross your mind that Tupac was really a poet?</li> <li>3. Believe it or not, rap and poetry might not be that different.</li> </ol>
Complex thoughts	
Examples of non-complex thoughts	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. People have done great things to rap.</li> <li>2. Did you ever wonder about rap?</li> <li>3. Drums have always been a part of rap.</li> </ol>
Examples of complex thoughts	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Teenagers listen to rap more than poetry. And adults listen to poetry more than rap.</li> <li>2. Centuries ago music could tell a story and express a feeling with just the beat of a drum.</li> <li>3. Before rap expanded and sang about drugs and violence, rap was simply drumbeats only they were still telling a story.</li> </ol>
Traditional communication patterns (TCP)	
Examples of TCP	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Imagine you are waiting in line, waiting to buy that new hot rap CD.</li> <li>2. Spoken word and slam poetry are still alive and kickin.</li> <li>3. Wassup with that rap?</li> </ol>
Understanding of audience and purpose	
Description	Students wrote according to a formula. The formula dictated what should be included in each paragraph. Students were given a standard reading passage to inform their writing.

Table 2: (continued)

<b>Baseline 2: Self</b>	
<b>Grammar Conventions</b>	
Below expectations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Music because music is what I here and some times they can change my mood from bad, mad, to a happy relaxed felling.</li> <li>2. He gives me breath, He wake's me up in the morning.</li> <li>3. I can injoy everything the universe has to thrown at me.</li> </ol>
At expectations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. My world is my family and music.</li> <li>2. We are alike in so many ways. We do everything together.</li> <li>3. My world is my life.</li> </ol>
Above expectations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. My mom told me that she doesn't want me to live the same life she had as a little girl.</li> <li>2. My world is karting because it's fun and brings me closer to my step dad.</li> <li>3. My world is my family even though there is a lot of separation.</li> </ol>
<b>Complex thoughts</b>	
Examples of non-complex thoughts	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. My world is sports.</li> <li>2. My world is my family.</li> <li>3. My world is my friends.</li> <li>4. I eat it and it makes me feel less hungry.</li> </ol>
Examples of complex thoughts	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. My world is life everything I do revolves around life.</li> <li>2. My friends are like my family, and yes I take them for granted sometimes.</li> </ol>
<b>Traditional communication patterns (TCP)</b>	
Examples of TCP	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. We are a ride or die family</li> <li>2. Nothing can beat the love I have for my family.</li> <li>3. My world is k-pop (Korean pop).</li> </ol>
<b>Understanding of audience and purpose</b>	
Description	Students answered an open ended prompt. Their answers could vary based on their understanding of the prompt. Each student showed an understanding of the prompt and wrote for an appropriate audience.

Table 2: (continued)

<b>Family</b>	
<b>Grammar Conventions</b>	
Below expectations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. But I do think some of my questions were a little to easy, like I think I coul'dve added a little more detail to them.</li> <li>2. It went well because he answer everything turthful and fun.</li> <li>3 I was kinda shock on some answers</li> <li>4. He has a very interesting Just kidding its borring! he is single and he dosn't like a girl.</li> <li>5. Also one of the easiest questions i asked her was what kind of food does she love to eat and that question i asked she had answered very quickly.</li> </ol>
At expectations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Well, the interview went good, even though we did it through texting.</li> <li>2. My interview with my brother was a interesting interview.</li> <li>3. I think that my interview with my mom and dad was very interesting.</li> </ol>
Above expectations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The person that I interviewed was D.L.M. When I was interviewing her she felt very comfortable with the questions I asked her.</li> <li>2. I was also shocked at some of the answers I heard from my mom.</li> <li>3. I believe my interview with A. went well. I woke her up but she answered all my questions without a fuss.</li> </ol>
<b>Complex thoughts</b>	
Examples of non-complex thoughts	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The interview went great.</li> <li>2. I feel like I asked good questions.</li> <li>3. I did well in the interview.</li> <li>4. My sister was cooperative.</li> </ol>
Examples of complex thoughts	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I was having an issue of being afraid because I don't like to talk to him that much.</li> <li>2. I think to do better at this is to be more open and ask better questions.</li> <li>3. If I did become a reporter of an interviewer I would need to upgrade my questions and make it harder for the person I am interviewing.</li> <li>4. I was surprised by the answers and entreeged by the way he spoke them.</li> <li>5. Yet the facial expressions of my interview was happy but solem.</li> </ol>
<b>Traditional communication patterns (TCP)</b>	
Examples of TCP	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I said she was a deva.</li> <li>2. her friend was talking the whole time and she was annoying and it got on my nerves.</li> </ol>

Table 2: (continued)

Understanding of audience and purpose	
Description	All students completed the assignment with an understanding of the purpose, as it was explained to them. They wrote appropriately for their audience.
<b>Community and World</b>	
Grammar Conventions	
Below expectation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. North Carolina have lots of problems.</li> <li>2. No one should do fracking.</li> <li>3. I think everyone should do health care.</li> </ol>
At expectation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Fracking is an environment problem in North Carolina.</li> <li>2. North Carolina should do better when it takes care of its people.</li> </ol>
Above expectations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I expect more from the people who are supposed to take care of us.</li> <li>2. Everyone deserves a good education and teachers should get paid for the education they give.</li> </ol>
Complex thoughts	
Examples of non-complex thoughts	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Fracking is something that hurts the land.</li> <li>2. I don't think teachers get paid enough.</li> <li>3. My mom says that we need health care.</li> </ol>
Examples of complex thoughts	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. North Carolina should say fracking is bad for the people and the land because fracking leads to nothing but destruction.</li> <li>2. Health care is important for poor and sick people and should be something we deserve.</li> <li>3. If I didn't have a good education, I wouldn't have no choices in life so I depend on my teachers.</li> </ol>
Traditional communication patterns (TCP)	
Examples of TCP	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Obama knows what's goin on.</li> <li>2. What's up with this fracking?</li> <li>3. Do you know what's going on with education? What our teachers have to deal with?</li> </ol>
Understanding of audience and purpose	
Description	All students wrote with an understanding of the purpose and format of the assignment.



Table 2: (continued)

<b>Identity</b>	
Grammar Conventions	
Below expectation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I am from the, roses the daisey.</li> <li>2. I am from H.R. were we play soccer.</li> <li>3. I am from maryland the one like shopping and going out and technology</li> </ol>
At expectation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I am from Virginia, fried chicken, and sweet potato pie.</li> <li>2. I am from the quinceneros and from Tio K.</li> <li>3. I am from being kind and respectful.</li> </ol>
Above expectation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I am from cooking and togetherness, from momi and papi and the love of my siblings.</li> <li>2. I am from the working and intelligent.</li> <li>3. I am from eating lunch in the park while we all played.</li> </ol>
Complex thoughts	
Examples of non-complex thoughts	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I am from home.</li> <li>2. I am from the trailer parks in Virginia.</li> <li>3. I am from North Carolina.</li> </ol>
Examples of complex thoughts	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I am from the active and crazy, from mischievous and sleepy.</li> <li>2. I am from the beach and curiosity, from April and Keith and the strong.</li> <li>3. I am from never give up and don't kill your sister.</li> <li>4. I am from the legacy my grandpa left us, the pathway he left us to follow and the example of a great human being.</li> </ol>
Traditional communication patterns (TCP)	
Examples of TCP	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I am from la iglesia catholica.</li> <li>2. I am from no te agas la mosca metra and tenete por tente ojo por ojo.</li> <li>3. I am from muneca and flaca.</li> <li>4. I am from the dark trashy loud hood.</li> </ol>
Understanding of audience and purpose	
Description	Each sample illustrated that the students understood the format, purpose and audience of this assignment.

Table 3: What community connections become evident through student writing?

<b>Community</b>	<b>Baseline 1</b>	<b>Baseline 2</b>	<b>Family</b>	<b>Community and World</b>	<b>Identity</b>
Evidence of stewardship					
Number of samples	0	9	0	22	2
Evidence of shared practices					
Number of samples	0	9	23	13	23
Evidence of social networks					
Family	No	Yes	yes	no	23
Friends	No	Yes	yes	no	0
School	No	Yes	yes	yes	0
Activities	No	Yes	yes	no	23
Religion	No	Yes	no	no	13
Education	No	Yes	yes	yes	0

Table 4: Descriptive examples

<b>Baseline 1</b>	
Evidence of stewardship	No examples
Evidence of shared practices	No examples
Evidence of social networks	
Family	no examples
Friends	no examples
School	no examples
Activities	no examples
Religion	no examples
<b>Baseline 2: Self</b>	
Evidence of stewardship	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I love my family and would do anything for them because I love them I can't live without them.</li> <li>2. I really care about them I don't know what I'd do without them.</li> <li>3. I really care about them I don't know what I'd do without them.</li> <li>4. They help me and support me through all of lives hardships thats why family is my world.</li> </ol>
Evidence of shared practices	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. My education will help me improve and get better grades so I would be able to go to college and get a good career.</li> <li>2. I can go to college and then hopefully into a university of eninnering.</li> <li>3. My world is karting because it's fun and brings me closer to my step dad.</li> <li>4. My world is my family and sports. We mostly like basketball. My family is the most important to me because they are there when I am sad, and we do everything together.</li> </ol>

Table 4: (continued)

Evidence of social networks	
Family	My mom because she takes care of me and she loves me and she puts food on the table and buy me clothes that's why I love her.
Friends	My best friend she always helps me when I'm down. She is always there for me when I need she always has my back. We are alike in so many ways. We do everything together.
School	My world is school because I know it's the most important thing to my future. That is why I came here to get education.
Activities	Art, art is my favorite subject. Its what I like do when Im board or when im sad, mad.
Religion	My world is Jesus because He supports all my needs and He never let's me down like human's do, And He always with me and never leaves me. Also He gives love to everyone and you fell peace and joy All the Time.
Education	I want to do better in school so I can go to college and then hopefully into a university of eninnering. My mom told that she doesn't want me to live the same life she had as a little girl.
<b>Family</b>	
Evidence of stewardship	
	no evidence
Evidence of shared practices	
	All students wrote about the questioning and interviewing process.

Table 4: (continued)

Evidence of social networks	
Family	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. She surprised me was why did she have 4 kids. Her response was "I was not planning on it."</li> <li>2. My mom said she understood me.</li> <li>3. My interview with my brother was a interesting interview.</li> <li>4. I did not know that my dad want to be a veterinarian when he grow up.</li> </ol>
Friends	My interview with my friend Delilah was boring.
School	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. She surprise me with her first experience coming to this school.</li> <li>2. I enjoyed doing this and I am glad my teacher told me to do this because I think it really helped a lot of people and I hope we do another activie like this.</li> </ol>
Activities	My world is computers they are what help me when no one is there.
Religion	no evidence
Education	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. It's like reading a book you can't put down.</li> <li>2. My mom said she would like to go to college.</li> </ol>
<b>Community and World</b>	
Evidence of stewardship	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. We should all say no to fracking because it hurts the land and the people.</li> <li>2. If we don't stand up for teachers who will?</li> <li>3. Don't you think we should help our state be a better place to live for everyone?</li> </ol>
Evidence of shared practices	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Going to the doctor is something that is important to my family.</li> <li>2. what happens if we can't go do school?</li> <li>3. We should all vote.</li> </ol>

Table 4: (continued)

Evidence of social networks	
Family	No examples
Friends	No examples
School	1. School is a place where students feel their futures take place. 2. If we don't help teachers, they may all quit.
Activities	n/a
Religion	n/a
Education	1. What would happen to all the students if there was no school? 2. My mom says if I don't do good in school I wont have no job when I grow up.
<b>Identity</b>	
Evidence of stewardship	
	1. I am from the one who doesn't play the one who will stick up for herself. 2. I am from Mexico and I'm proud of it. I will always love where I came from.
Evidence of shared practices	
	1. I am from the family that celebrates quincenera, Christmas and Thanksgiving. 2. I am from chicken every night. 3. I am from racing and hard work. 4. I am from celebrating 15's.
Evidence of social networks	
Family	1. I am from a picture on a wall with the hole family which is worth the memory in my heart. 2. I am from the one who made me, the one who took care of me, and the one who feed me. 3. I am from home and thats the most valued.
Friends	No examples
School	No examples
Activities	1. I am from the first time I kicked a soccer ball. 2. I am from checkered flags. 3. I am from hood were we turn up a party.
Religion	1. I am from Sunday and Wednesday church. 2. From me being told I'm a blessing and creation from God and everything happens for a reason.
Education	No examples

Table 5: In what ways does place-based education affect students' views of identity, community, and agency?

<b>Identity</b>	Baseline 1	Baseline 2	Family	Community and World	Identity
Social capital					
Number of samples	0	23	less than 1	23	23
Patterns of self-understanding					
Number of samples	Use of personal pronouns	13	23	17	23
Future expectations					
Number of samples	0	14	9	4	3
Connections to dominant culture					
Number of samples	23	7	9	23	23
Connections to context					
Number of samples	0	9	7	23	23

Table 6: Descriptive examples

<b>Baseline 1</b>	
Evidence of social capital	
	no evidence
Patterns of self-understanding	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Hey! Did you ever wonder how rap and poetry evolved through history?</li> <li>2. What if rap and poetry were more similar than you think?</li> <li>3. Whoever created this I thank them because it can actually help me or other people let our feelings and thoughts out.</li> </ol>
Future expectations	
	no evidence
Connections to dominant culture	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Rap gained popularity in the US in the 1970's.</li> <li>2. Can you imagine that rap and poetry was never created or there not being any rappers or poets?</li> <li>3. Many people think that rap is all bad but really it is a hard core of poetry.</li> </ol>
Connections to context	
	no evidence
<b>Baseline 2: Self</b>	
Evidence of social capital	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Love is important.</li> <li>2. But the most important thing in the world for me is preparing myself because I want to see God one day.</li> <li>3. I also love my education because my education will help me improve and get better grades so I would be able to go to college and get a good career.</li> <li>4. Then there's my education since it will help me get a good job to sustain myself and help out my family.</li> </ol>



Table 6: (continued)

Patterns of self-understanding	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. God loves me and he respects me for who I am.</li> <li>2. My world is my life. Without my life I wouldn't be alive and nothing else would be important. I need to survive but I also want to have fun. I don't wanna die, I want to stay alive.</li> <li>3. They help me and support me through all of lives hardships thats why family is my world.</li> </ol>
Future expectations	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. My world is love because it is the greatest feeling that helps people go forward and never stop.</li> <li>2. But the most important thing in the world for me is preparing myself because I want to see God one day.</li> <li>3. I also love my education because my education will help me improve and get better grades so I would be able to go to college and get a good career.</li> </ol>
Connections to dominant culture	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. My favorite type of music is rap, hip hop they always get me on my feet.</li> <li>2. God is my world.</li> <li>3. I can go to college and then hopefully into a university of eninnering.</li> </ol>
Connections to context	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. My world is karting because it's fun and brings me closer to my step dad.</li> <li>2. My world is my family even though there is a lot of separation.</li> <li>3. We mostly like basketball.</li> <li>4. Second is my education because it is more important than video games and music.</li> </ol>
<b>Family</b>	
Evidence of social capital	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I said she was a deva.</li> <li>2. I learned that a good question gets a lot of details and you learn more stuff.</li> <li>3. I used a lot of good words that I learned in Ms. Richardson's class. My mom liked that.</li> </ol>

Table 6: (continued)

Patterns of self-understanding	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. My reflection was okay because my mom had to think about a few questions.</li> <li>2. I wasn't thinking good enough with these questions.</li> <li>3. It went well because he answer everything truthful and fun.</li> <li>4. I couldnt have made better questions than I did.</li> <li>5. I was having an issue of asking him questions because I don't like to talk to him that much.</li> </ol>
Future expectations	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. If I did become a reporter or interviewer I would have to upgrade my questions.</li> <li>2. I want to do another interview and we will see how that gose!</li> <li>3. I want to do this again. I was kinda shocked by some of the answers.</li> </ol>
Connections to dominant culture	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. My mom wanted to be a culuary chef.</li> <li>2. My sister says she wanted to go to college.</li> </ol>
Connections to context	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Like I know that my tio's are players but but my tio K. is like the number one.</li> <li>2. My mom's favorite food is the stuff she learned to make in her home country.</li> </ol>
<b>Community</b>	
Evidence of social capital	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Fracking hurts the land and people and shouldn't be in North Carolina.</li> <li>2. Fracking is bad for the environment. I wouldn't want to drink water that can be on fire.</li> <li>3. Education is important for all kids. It should be important to tax payers.</li> </ol>
Patterns of self-understanding	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. If I don't have a teacher in my classroom how am I supposed to learn?</li> <li>2. I am sad when I think about what fracking does to the earth.</li> <li>3. My mom says that we can't go to the doctor.</li> </ol>

Table 6: (continued)

Future expectations	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. College will help me be a success but it wont if I don't have a good teacher now.</li> <li>2. What will happen to the earth in the future with fracking?</li> </ol>
Connections to dominant culture	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The businesses want fracking because it will make them lots of money and they will make lots of jobs.</li> <li>2. Teachers protest with signs at the capital building.</li> <li>3. Obama thinks he can solve all the health care problems.</li> </ol>
Connections to context	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. My teacher is really good. I hope she is making more money than the people who are mad.</li> <li>2. I am afraid that the water I am drinking is poison.</li> <li>3. My little sister has asma. What would happen if we couldn't take her to the doctor?</li> </ol>
<b>Identity</b>	
Evidence of social capital	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I am from the don't do what they tell you do what you want, like your Tio R.</li> <li>2. I am from the one who doesn't play the one who will stick up for herself.</li> <li>3. From being told I'm, a blessing and creation from God, and everything happen for a reason.</li> <li>4. I am from believing anything I want to.</li> </ol>
Patterns of self-understanding	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I am from the short and the loud and the thick mustaches and hardworking and chubby.</li> <li>2. I am from being respectful and being nice and kind.</li> <li>3. I am from the one who made me, the one who took care of me, and the one who feed me.</li> <li>4. I am from the weird and forgiving.</li> </ol>
Future expectations	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I am from Mexico were I am from and always will be from.</li> <li>2. I am from Mexico and I'm proud of it. I will always love where I came from.</li> </ol>

Table 6: (continued)

Connections to dominant culture	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I am from merry Christmas and happy thanksgiving.</li> <li>2. I am from the state with a cardinal as the state bird and a dogwood as the state tree.</li> <li>3. I am from the family that celebrates quinecera, christmas and thanksgiving.</li> </ol>
Connections to context	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I am from El Salvador, puposas and panes reynos.</li> <li>2. I am from the dark trashy loud hood.</li> <li>3. I am from the dry destert, I am from that one river oasis and from the prickly plants that sting.</li> <li>4. I am from a small town in a big world.</li> </ol>

\*All information that could identify a person or the town in which the study was conducted was removed and replaced with initials.

APPENDIX D: *Invictus*

## Invictus

Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll.  
I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul.

William Ernest Henley

## APPENDIX E: SAMPLES OF I AM FROM.... POEMS

## Erin Donovan's Poem

I am from graveled culdascacs, from ballet shoes and decorated bike shows.

I am from yellow walls, hot, dry, fluffy white.

I am from sticky grass and stickered socks, from skinned knees, and gappy teeth.

I am from baking bread, and loud talking from Gram and Papa and Lola.

I am from always knowing I am right and always having the last word to make sure everyone else knows I am.

From mean Molly and thunder falling like apples in the sky.

I am from hymns sung a little too far of key and secret prayers drifting high in the rafters.

I'm from Murpheys and Donovans proud on both sides of where they were from, pretending they never left but making the best of what they had.

I'm from bee cheese and tuna dip, from sheet cake, and mints that still melt on the top of my tongue.

From catching frogs, and sitting on ants, from walking to the park all by ourselves but never past the light of the street lights.

I am from pictures smiling, lining the halls reminding me of love and laughs and hugs and kisses and smiles and hope.

## Alicia's Poem

I am from New York from Android and God.

I am from the beautiful

I am from the bubbly, the floating.

I am from giving and caring from Uncle M. and Sister V. and Uncle J.

I am from the day that my dad got his motorcycle and the day that we followed God.

From Kevka and Tlapia.

I am from a apostolic church from they greet him and care about everybody.

I'm from Mexico, tacos and chili

from the day that my dad brothers and sister get together as a family

The day was Decemeber 24, 2009, and my mom was happy that day.

I am from New York were everything started from the beginning to now.

## Cynthia's Poem

I am from small and unique town of G. North Carolina. I am from a small home that is warm and cosy in the winter but ice cold in the summer. My home is in an old town but has a new feel to it. I am from the state with a cardinal as the state bird and dogwood as the state tree. I am from the family that celebrates quincenera, Christmas, and thanksgiving. My family trait is light skin from both my mom and my dad's side, R. and M.

I am from the family that has a tendency to be loud and to cook and eat Italian food.

From me being told I am a blessing and creation from God, and everything happens for a reason. I was born in B., NC but my family ancestors are Hispanic, Italian and white descent. I am from tortillas and pasta, I am proud of where I am from.

## Omar's Poem

I am from Nayarit, from takis to tamales.

I am from the dry desert, I am from that one river oasis and from the prickly plants that sting.

I am from Mexico and every time I go to Mexico I go hunting and the tallness from my mom, dad and my uncles, and my dad

I am from loudness from the P. and the smartness from M.

From ponte las pillas and run and run I am gifted from Jesus.

I am from B. but my family is from Mexico our two most important foods are tacos and tamales.

From the first time I kicked a soccer ball and I won't stop playing soccer till I die. I am from a small town in a big world.

## Maria's Poem

I am from laptops from iPhones and Ipods. I am from trailer parks in Virginia. I am from the little creeks on the side of the road, the pits of grass full of old car engines. I am from going to Texas every year and fearlessness, from my uncle R. and my pawpa and my mother. I am from bravery no matter the struggle, and the risk takers.

From never give up and don't kill your sisters. I am from believing in anything I want to.

I'm from Tennessee and Virginia, from chicken every night, and chocolate strawberries.

From the divorce of my mawmal and pawpal, the necklace and the loving.

I am from the D's, R's, and J's.



## Jada's Poem

I am from a small town in North Carolina  
I am from a loud place with lots of trees.  
I am from a place with lots of big and tall trees.  
I am from where people race on and off the streets.  
I am from a ghetto place where people fight and shoot animals.  
I am from a place in the hood with bad things.  
I am from where we just let free and go for it.

## Anthony's Poem

I am from G., from Apple and Samsung Galaxy.  
I am from the brick house  
I am from the two-lips, the daisy.  
I am from cooking and togetherness, from momi and popi and my siblings.  
I am from the crazy and loving.  
From "behave or I hit you" and "that guy is going to take you if you don't listen to me."  
I am from Christianity and love and serve God.  
I am from El Salvador, puposas and panes reynos.  
From the hardworking, the active, and the cooking.  
I am from loving like my family is.

## Sarah's Poem

I am from checkered flags from noz and Phantom.

I am from a white house.

I am from the dirt and rivers.

I am from karting parties and honesty, from W. and A. and the W.

I am from racing and hard work. From try your best and you can do it. I am from Christianity and God.

I am from Virgina, fried chicken, sweet potatoes.

From Aunt N. and Uncle F.

I am from the mountains and peace love and happiness.

## Karen's Poem

I am from Mexico, from the one who likes Iphones

I am from the roses and the daisey

I am from celebrating 15's and from brown eyess from sister brother A.

I am from acting your age.

I am from Mexico, tacos and posole,

I am from the one who took care of me.

I am from Mexico were I will always be from.

## Tyrone's Poem

I am from North Carolina, from fuel and technology. I am from the serene, working, and intelligent. I am from the poinsettias and the sunflower. I am from Christmas and intelligence, from grandma P. M., and papa B. M. and papa E. M. I am from the nice and helpful. From potential and desire. I am from the Christian religion where I don't do bad things. I am from G. and from my ancestors papa B. and grandma P., chicken and corn too. From the M's, W. M., the popular, the intelligent and my mom S. M., the nice and helpful, I am from the middle of my mom and dad the photo of me in kindergarten for the first time, archiving me doing a report with enthusiasm and eye contact.

## Edward's Poem

I am from Nayarit El Rio from bimbo and takis  
 I am from the desert, its hot oasis, the noise from the river's cool.  
 I am from cactus, empanadas, the river  
 I am from cookouts and curly hair, from A. C. and E. C. and S.  
 I am from the short and the loud and thick mustaches and hard working and chubby  
 I am from B., Hispanic, and Latino, shrimp and pozole  
 From the trips we take to Kentucky and how they were long.  
 I am from Ixtlan, El Rio de Nayarit.

## Elizabeth's Poem

I am from pictures for memories from God and holy spirits. I'm from the peaceful I'm from the creek and the trees the pentecostils and pupusas from my grandpa and my mommy and grandma.

I am from pray to God and things that are "imposibl" will happen because God is powerful. I am from "I am penticostl and I'm not afraid to say it." I'm from the sweet county of A. and pupusas and tamales. From the resurection, the strong, and the guns. I'm from the brave family of the A. and R.

## Martha's Poem

I am from novelas from Que probres tan ricos and lo que la vida mi robo.

I am from Mexican food.

I am from red tulips.

I am from quincenaras and from tio K. and tio P.

I am from the cooking mexican food and watching T.V.

From no te agos la mosca metra and tente por tente ojo por ojo.

I am from catholics.

I am from Mexico, rice with salsa verde with pico de gaya and chicken.

From gramma hitting my uncles for just the little wrong things they did.

## Caesar's Poem

I am from Mexico from tamales and tacos.

I am from peace.

I am from trees, the dandelions.

I am from quinceneras and nacimientos from G. and D. and L.'s.

I am from crazy and loud and quiet and proud.

From muneca and flaca

I am from Jesus.

I am from Chapel Hill, pozole and carne asada.

From the don't do what they tell you, do what you want like you tio R.

I am from taking pictures with my family and getting my dog from my dad.

## Jessica's Poem

I am from G., NC from Nintindo and Apple.

I am from the two story, huge yard house. I am from the poison ively and oak trees I always climbed.

I am from presents on Christmas and Thanksgiving diner from my cousin Abby and my sisters J., J., and K.

For you can do it and clean your room!

I am from praising God and going to church.

I am from UNC Chapel Hill.

From me and my cousin always breaking glass cups and us blaming it on the cat, and from me getting dared to pet a random dog to getting 63 stitches in my face.

I am from eating lunch in the park while we all played. From my mom helping me when I was down and my grandpas tie.

#### John's Poem

I am from G. NC.

I am from the dark trashy loud hood.

I am from the red roses and the pine trees.

I am from Sunday and Wednesday church and loud and bossy and from old and private.

I am from the "you better get this up!" and "clean up!" when the house is clean to me.

From "sit your tell down!" and "be quiet!"

I am from A. region, new Jersey and more barbeque chicken and sweet potato pie and greens.

From the day when it was my papas birthday and aunt B. was carrying the b-day cake when my uncle stuck his feet out to trip her and she fell with the cake and her face slammed right into it. And the time when I was in the woods and fell over a pile of sticks and cut my knee open with a bicycle rim= 16 stitches and crutches.

I am from a picture on the wall with the hole family one which is worth the memory in my heart.

## Jacquie's Poem

I am from Mexico, from iphones and Tablets. I am from the aqua house, I am from the black roses, the daisys.

I am from quincenera and funny, from K. H. and L. C. and Reyes.

I am from the active and crazy from mischievious and sleepy. I am from pizza and menudo.

From the great grandpa the awesome cousin and the nice mother I am from Mexico and I am proud of it.

I will always love where I come from.