

# Learning the Language of Home: Using Place-based Writing Practice to Help Rural Students Connect to Their Communities

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*The idea of “place” extends beyond the locations where people live. Place is a narrative which shapes identity and culture and provides an understanding of experience. By exploring place and the connections which evolve from place, an intriguing context begins to take a shape that inspires transformational ideas and actions. This article investigates how place-based writing practices affect rural middle school students’ connections with their home community as evidenced through their writing. This study follows the critical pedagogy of place theoretical framework and works to support best practices in rural education research. A qualitative case study design was used to conduct this study in a rural middle school in North Carolina.*

**Keywords:** place-based, rural, writing, language

## 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.

## Overview

The idea of “place” is significant. Embracing place and understanding the importance of helping students connect with their home communities may help educators inspire 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” (p. 76). To provide education that truly meets the needs of students, educators must seek to understand the places from which their students originate (Ross, 2003). This consideration helps educators better connect the students with their environments and may lead to school experiences that more aptly fit with the students’ home communities and values.

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 result may be a school experience that exists separately from real life, leaving students feeling disconnected. Students

should learn to embrace the places that serve to characterize their lives (Bishop, 2004). An education complimenting students’ home communities serves to embolden authentic engagement and creates lasting change (Corbett, 2009). Schools then may begin to become places of community renewal rather than factors in community disintegration.

The impact of schools on community development, renewal, and endurance is especially evident in rural communities (Smith & Sobel, 2010). Rural America fights to have its voice heard and its issues counted as relevant in the American society where there is a growing emphasis regarding the value of urbanization (Smith, 2002). Enabling students to become advocates for their communities while developing significant ties to their home places may be one solution (Howley, Theobald & Howley, 2005). This article explores the importance of place and how writing can be used to help students connect with and better understand their home communities.

## Statement of the Problem

Rural America is unique as a place. While it houses only about 20% of the population, rural communities encompass 91% of the area of the United States. Rural areas are characterized through varying issues, topography, and demographics creating 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 do those farmers share the problems associated with the isolation of an Appalachian family. In seeking to define what rural means, Howley et al. (2005)

suggested that it is not the boundaries or population count which define an area as being rural. Rather, the idea of rural is characterized by lifestyles, cultural norms, and the inherent meanings that accompany a specific standard of living.

Even within these differences, rural areas face similar circumstances that threaten both their sustainability and their future development. Too often rural areas are seen as declining economic entities. When the communities lose economic viability, they may become expendable (Gruenewald, 2003). For decades, rural areas that once relied upon agriculture as a major source of income have weakened, and the lower paying, non-agricultural jobs that remain, 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). This conflict becomes a defining feature which threatens the growth and sustainability of rural populations.

Growth is a serious issue in rural areas, as compared 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 of population was exacerbated by economic shifts which created a scarcity of employment opportunities in rural areas. First agriculture waned as a source of employment, and then industries that once maintained entire communities became outsourced to countries with lower labor costs (Sherman, 2011; Wake, 2009). The result of these substantial economic changes was a decrease in the availability of employment options which might reasonably sustain a family. This downward shift contributed to the increasing migration of individuals under the age of 45 to more urban areas. The migration of young people may also 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 (Corbett, 2009; Smith & Sobel, 2010). Indeed those students with advanced abilities and talents may feel pressure to leave their home communities for employment or educational opportunities not readily available in rural areas. Those students who stay may feel deficient in their abilities and may allow that indication of deficiency to affect their societal contributions.

Because of the loss of young people and a decreased sense of sustainability, the institution of

rural education struggles to maintain its identity while it fights to support communities it serves (Kelly, 2009). Rural schools must contend with slow population growth, mandated curriculum that does not fit the needs of the students, the growing threat of children leaving their home communities, and marginal representation in academic research (Azano, 2011; Gruenewald, 2003; Wake, 2009). Nationally, rural schools do not fit into the standardized world which large urban school districts and state governments tend to support. Problems which ensue include the reduction of per capita resource allocation, the reality that rural populations are devalued in policy discussions, the insistence of procedures that require resources rural schools don't possess, and the inability to define rural education in a unified manner (Budge, 2006; Haas, 1991; Smith & Sobel, 2010). These factors threaten the health and development of sustainable schools and create institutions which are unable to support the needs of their students.

Paradoxically, rural schools remain the centers of their communities and often serve as the most stable entities in towns facing financial peril due to economic shifts and widespread poverty (Sherman, 2011). This conflict places the schools in a precarious position. It their job to educate and provide civic leadership to their communities (Theobald, 2000). However when they do educate children, those children may choose to find economic opportunities outside their home communities. This situation creates tension between the schools and the communities and questions follow regarding the value of education (Corbett, 2009; Esposito, 2012; Sherman, 2011). Often that cost, the loss of children to economic opportunity, is not supported by struggling families working to keep their families and communities together.

The concept of supporting the community through conscious decision making which places community welfare first is evidenced through the idea of *stewardship* (Azano, 2009). Stewardship teaches people to celebrate the interdependence of life which may form a sense of belonging that should endure even when community members move to other locations (Kelly, 2009). Based on this concept, it is then the position of the school to encourage students to invest in their communities while also developing their own skills and abilities. Accordingly, once a person is part of a community, forming an attachment to it, that attachment should prompt a sense of sustainable connection.

But how can rural students become social stewards when these students often feel no connection with their home communities? The concept of *alienation* implies there is a disassociation

of the student from his or her educational and community environment. Many rural students suffer a feeling of alienation in the school environment and which may bleed into their interactions within tight knit communities (Haas, 1991; Smith & Sobel, 2010). To counteract this, students may feel the need to leave their communities. This deficit mindset contributes to the problem of brain drain. Students may also struggle with their shifting sense of identity in communities that do not reflect their values nor strive to accommodate the students' newly acquired interests. This sense of alienation increases with the use of standardized curriculum that many times does not adequately address the unique culture of the rural school. Rural students need a curriculum originating from their experiences (Corbett, 2009; Theobald, 1997). Traditionally, standardized curriculum operates independently from student context or "place" (Gruenewald, 2003; Wake, 2009). This separation enforces 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 students trying on identities that may fit better within 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 communities through developing a connection to place (Azano, 2011). Creating more relevant curriculum, based on the places in which the students reside, can be a classroom by classroom task as teachers must work to find time to develop cultural identities, connections, and competencies within their students (Frederickson, 2003; Haas, 1991). Often, teachers simply don't have the time or the freedom to find real success and default to teaching the proscribed curriculum.

In order to work against student alienation and help students connect with their home communities, 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 students as they interact in the classroom (Esposito, 2012). Respecting social capital and the funds of knowledge the students bring with them to school allows students to better connect with and appreciate the world as they explore their changing identities (Esposito, 2012; Gruenewald, 2003). Building this awareness should be an essential goal of all classrooms but is especially important when students are negotiating their identities in rural communities. Additionally, embracing the social capital of the students works against brain drain by

connecting the classroom with the values of the home and helps teachers better understand the situation of the family.

This respect for and acknowledgement of social capital is an essential component when implementing authentic writing practices in the curriculum. The concept of using writing as a means to access, investigate, and celebrate social capital can be advanced by allowing students to express themselves, drawing upon their home values and traditional communication patterns (Smith & Sobel, 2010). Esposito (2012) suggested that developing writers through authentic tasks rooted in social capital will improve the writing in both mechanics and content. To compliment this notion, Gruenewald (2003) contended that the text students read should be experientially rooted in students' lives and practices. Moffett (1965) was an early supporter for developing the voice of the writer as a means of developing the writing itself. An overall increased emphasis on writing may also lead to increased student achievement. Douglas Reeves (2000) in his study of the writing practices in Indiana, found that when writing is emphasized in the curriculum, not only do interdisciplinary content connections increase, so also do test scores. Students begin to learn how to use writing to express their understanding in a way that is not possible with reading alone. As well, curriculum that has a strong emphasis on the connection between reading and writing encourages high-level critical thinking and evidences increased rates of comprehension (Reeves, 2010; Vacca, Vacca & Mraz, 2013). Writing allows students the space to ask questions and come to their own conclusions which may exist outside the text but may relate very much to their own world and experiences.

Writing is then essential to students' comprehension of and association with the worlds in which they live. Writing helps connect students with their communities, assisting them in the construction of their identities (Larson, 2000). Wigginton (1991) reminded educators that just because students are *of* a culture, does not necessarily mean they know or understand that culture. This idea of disconnection prompts the need for a curriculum rooted in cultural responsiveness. The concept of culturally responsive education moves beyond simply identifying the cultural differences of students to using those differences to guide instruction and build awareness of the needs, identities, and funds of knowledge the students bring to the educational environment (A'Vant, Sullivan, 2009). One method of teaching through a culturally responsive mindset is to allow students to explore their experiences through writing. Students may begin to question and test the boundaries of their identities. This provided space

for questioning may lead to greater authenticity when relationships are created between student and teacher. Jacobs (2011) suggested that students need an opportunity to write authentically and meaningfully about their lives. This opportunity honors their voices, encourages engagement, and helps them form identities not dictated by standardization, which may act as a force of alienation. In other words students can use writing to testify about their lives and experiences in a way that matters substantially more as they begin to better understand their own identities and how those identities are reflective of their home communities.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of place-based writing practices on rural middle school students' use of language to understand how those practices helped them build connections to their community. A collaborative relationship with a rural classroom teacher was developed to explore the interaction between curriculum, student writing, and community. This descriptive case study used the classroom as a natural setting, which allowed for inductive description. The data was analyzed through a critical pedagogy of place, which suggests evaluating contextual details to better understand the impact of place on the student (Gruenewald, 2003). The case study focuses on one middle school classroom where curriculum was planned, instructed, and assessed collaboratively by the researcher and the cooperating teacher. The findings are presented descriptively through the analysis of the data which included student writing, observations, and interviews. Thematic and content analysis were used together to prepare a more complete understanding of the students and their work.

### **Research Context**

This study took place in a rural middle school located in North Carolina. At the time of the study, the school served 644 students compared to the district average of 758 students and the state average of 668 students (Alamance-Burlington School System, 2012). It was considered by the state to be a *school of progress*, which indicates that at least 60% of its students are on grade level regarding their reading and math proficiency. The school was 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. Thirty-four percent of the school's students were African American, 36% are Hispanic, and 27% are

White. There were approximately 1% Asian and Native American students. Nine percent of the school's population was considered Gifted and Talented and 17% are labeled Exceptional Children (EC). Of its 644 students, 280 were categorized as English as a Second Language (ESL) students. 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 in the school and am well acquainted with the principal. Because I am a former teacher at this site, I am also knowledgeable of both the culture of the school and the community. This is a school that is well sustained by its surrounding community, which is significant because, as Esposito (2012) explained, a successful rural school must be supported by the surrounding community.

The collaborating teacher, Mrs. Richardson (a pseudonym), has been a teacher for the last thirteen years. She spent nine of those years at Main Street Middle School. She has been a language arts teacher in both the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades. 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 succeed on their end of year exams, as that is the predominant measure of student growth. In that way, she was a mentor to her team and helped other teachers with student grouping, interventions, reading choices, book clubs, and reading strategies. At the time of this study, she resided in the school's community. Originally she comes from a community in the mountains of North Carolina so she is well versed on the realities of rural life.

This study took place over eight weeks in the winter semester. The timing was ideal because it represented one section of this school's calendar year. Since the school follows a year round schedule, 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, listened and responded to read alouds, worked with mentor texts, and participated in debates and interactive writing assignments. Work samples were collected every week as the students completed assignments in their student notebooks. Teacher and student interviews took place throughout the eight weeks. Additionally, classroom observations were utilized to better understand discourse and the application of the lesson plans. All lessons were planned collaboratively to best support the needs of Mrs. Richardson and her students. As I often served as a co-teacher, I found

flexibility in planning and instruction as I could alter both to better respond to the themes found in the students' writing.

I grouped our lessons into three main units: family, community and world, and identity. Within each unit I worked with Mrs. Richardson to choose texts and writing activities that revolved around place, helping the students learn about their home community while showing a connection to its impact on their changing identities. Also, I wanted the students to spend their writing time focusing on *what* they were writing rather than *how* they were writing. As well, the development of the sequence of the lesson plans helped students build an understanding which better connected their identities to their community. The lessons began with a focus on the family. Then the curriculum moved to support the students' knowledge of their community. To accomplish this the students explored and described their school environment, and then wrote about the history and significant places in their town. Students were then introduced to important state issues which were also significant in their home community. In the last unit the students used what they learned about place to write about their identities while gaining a sense of connection within the context of their community.

Throughout this experience, students demonstrated an understanding of the connection of local concerns with actions and actors of the 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 activities and information that should be included for future students. Through interviews and observations, the students showed genuine engagement as they learned about their community and connected what they learned to their own experiences. They talked about memories and provided travel tips to ensure that I was able to take part in everything the community had to offer. Conversations and the subsequent writing allowed opportunity for authentic expression because the students became the experts.

### **Findings**

This study argues that place-based writing practices help empower rural students, allowing them connect with their home communities while demonstrating a greater understanding of their identities. The primary purpose of this study was to describe how rural middle school students' writing changed when place-based writing practices were employed. The results of this study indicated that

place-based writing practices may 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 authentically engage in the classroom activities. 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.

Through content and thematic analysis, the data was coded to explain changes that became apparent in the writing. The codes were based on concepts found in existing research, commonalities in student and teacher interviews, and patterns found in student writing. When assessing overall changes in the writing, the samples were coded based on length of writing and use of grammatical conventions (Applebee & Langer, 2012). Social capital and traditional communication patterns were also attributes that were important in improving student writing skills (Smith & Sobel, 2010). When the codes were applied to student work at the conclusion of the study, it was found that students were able to write longer pieces and they had fewer issues with grammatical conventions and sentence structure. 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 topics. When coding the creative prompts, those which allowed a greater freedom of expression, the writing also improved although on a different level. When the students wrote, they did so motivated by the assignment itself rather than the grade they might receive for their work. Again, there were improvements in the grammatical conventions and length of the writing, but the real improvement was in the way the students wrote. They became critical and honest about their situations. Even in this honesty, they developed a protective voice that employed higher-level thinking to accurately describe their situations. Above all, their writing demonstrated a complex understanding which evidenced a growing connection to their communities and an ability to express that connection through writing.

The connections to community were shown through the students writing 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 more

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 because they didn't understand it rather than because of its shortcomings.

Identity was defined through the development of social capital, self-understanding, and contextual connections. The writing showed that they were highly aware of their identities and how at times those identities did not fit within the context of their school and their community. It was apparent that the idea of identity affected how they interacted with their community. Providing a base rooted in the positive aspects of their home community helped to promote self-awareness, empowerment, and a greater connection to their families, school, and community.

### **The Class**

Student writing was first analyzed on the class level to better uncover overall trends. The first assignment collected was the essay which discussed how issues in North Carolina impacted the students' daily lives. Students could choose to write about health care, education, immigration, or environmental issues. This choice allowed them to pick the topic that most directly related to their daily lives. Through this assignment, the students showed that they were beginning to understand how the actions of the government impacted their homes and families. The samples also demonstrated the need to advocate for and take care of the people and land of their home communities. All samples included examples of shared practices and social networks, both signposts for community awareness. Through this idea of shared practices students also demonstrated that they understood how social networks could be conduits of change. The students showed signs of making plans for change and wrote statements that indicated change was needed. They questioned the direct consequences of inaction and spoke about issues through stories which showed personal connections to the issues. The capstone assignment, the *I am from....* poem, provided an opportunity for the students to name their social networks and describe the impact of those networks on their daily lives. As the students completed the unit, the impact of the community was inherent in their writing as they discovered the unique importance of the individual, the family, and the larger community which held all three together.

This study also sought to investigate whether or not place-based writing practices would impact the mechanics and content of student writing. Analyzing student writing through its conventions, apparent connections, and patterns of identity provided an opportunity to define the impact of place-based writing practices. Indeed, student writing showed that when the students wrote about place, their writing changed. Because they were allowed to write about subjects they understood and connected with, the students became more effective communicators. The writing pieces were longer and contained less mechanical errors. The voice of the writers changed from stiff and unnatural as they began to tell stories they created based on their understanding of place. The students did not simply copy information from passages they really did not comprehend; they thought about the problems in the passages and related the impact of those issues to their circumstances. They associated with their community in a way which showed that 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, their family, and their own individuality. When the students wrote about where they were from, they began to take on a tone of expertise. This provided a confidence that translated into their writing style. They were more effective communicators because they began to write like they spoke. Their grammar and the complexity of their writing improved because they were concerned more about *what* they had to say rather than fixating on *how* they said it. Therefore when the students wrote from an understanding of place they became more effective and authentic communicators.

### **Tyrone**

The next step for data analysis was to look at exemplar students. Tyrone's writing was chosen because of his difficulty in creating connections within his world. Tyrone 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. He became easily frustrated and continually struggled with simple instructions. 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 often translated into his daily behaviors. Overall his writing evidenced strong communication patterns and showed a good grasp of grammatical conventions and the

composition of complex thoughts. What it lacked was a connection to the community. Because of his learning disability, Tyrone tended to be socially detached and that disconnection was evident in his writing. The eventual change in Tyrone's writing demonstrated how a curriculum with place as a primary component might help students connect with their home community.

His writing was analyzed writing according to the three categories of stewardship, shared practices, and social networks. The baseline assignment, which was an essay derived from a reading passage that described the history of rap, did not include any 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.

**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 the provided prompt, *My world is....* He explained the importance and meaning of his life and hinted at a conflict between survival and fun. There was nothing in this writing which indicated a connection to community. There was 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 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 existence.

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. The essay that resulted showed a transition from his usual position of isolation. His writing began to show a connection with the idea that context impacts life. For example, when he used facts from his writing they linked to make a point. This showed growth from his first essay assignment, where the facts he chose from the passage were randomly related and did not evidence deep comprehension of the material. A sense of stewardship was also present when he advised the reader to say no to fracking. His writing also explained the impact of the larger world on his life as he used it to express his opinions, ready for them to be imparted to others. Shared practices were evidenced in his writing such as needing oil and jobs. This again showed that he understood these were common problems which existed for many people, not just himself. 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 the impact of these communal issues.

**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 with others appropriately due his learning disability. This writing also showed how he was beginning to

describe and understand his unique personality. An increased connection with social networks and shared practices helped frame his poem. For example, 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 of isolation, this writing showed a deeper understanding of the impact of community on how he envisioned himself. Overall, this writing indicated his ability to name his family as an important source of influence in his life and growing sense of connected identity.

**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.

## Conclusion

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. They write about what they know, developing a voice of expertise. They write using words and grammatical conventions they understand, rather than 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 empowers students as stakeholders within their community and strengthens a connection to place that they may carry with them throughout their lives.

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