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“We’re Rural Not Dumb”: An Examination of Literacy Sponsorship

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Abstract: The study explores how literacy sponsorship (Brandt, 2001) is constructed in a United States rural region by focusing on the discourse of rural teachers and students. Data included interviews with teachers and students, classroom observations, an environmental print literacy scan, and analysis of community and classroom-based texts. A multi-cycle coding approach was used to develop thematic findings. Overall, the findings demonstrate that schooling and teachers serve as the recognized literacy sponsors in the community while the role of parents as active literacy sponsors and place-based literacies went unrecognized. Two aspects of sponsorship were apparent: 1) the value of interpersonal relationships and 2) the adherence to normative, placeless English language arts curricula. Instead of seeking out local texts, participants demonstrated their professionalism as stewards of the educational trust enacted in these communities which does not accommodate critical perspectives. Implications for literacy educators include the need for the larger community of critical literacy educators to address rural learners as central to our collective work at both the policy and research level.

Keywords: rural literacy, rural education, English language arts teachers,
secondary education, sociocultural perspectives



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Introduction¹

The sign with broken lighting rests on the grassy verge, beckoning passersby with a call to consider provisions, spiritual and nutritional. “Psalms 34:8. Squash. Cucumbers. Hake Fish,” it advertises. Set in the heart of the rural mid-Atlantic region, the sign makes sense. It signifies local knowledge, relevant literacies, and place-based knowledge (Azano, 2011; Eckert & Alsup, 2015; Eppley, 2011; Eppley & Corbett, 2012). Featuring a discursive meaning valuing fresh, local, and homegrown, this is the kind of sign that students attending schools in our Mid-Atlantic region might encounter on a daily basis. The placement of Psalms 34:8 (New International Version) above all other words on the sign may mirror the Christian value of keeping God first in one’s life, a tenet that might be heard from many of the pulpits in our area on any given Sunday morning, regardless of the varying denominations. The verse to which the sign refers, “Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him” (Psalms 34:8, New International Version), is just one example of the dynamic literacies present amidst the farms and bays that characterize our area. The placement of the verse on the sign urges

motorists to recognize their spiritual needs; but the aptly fitting “taste and see” which lures tourists and locals alike into browsing the selection of vegetables and fish demonstrates a much more sophisticated use of literacy than a first glance may yield. The rhetorical sophistication involved in selecting a Biblical verse that functions to declare spiritual affiliation and to evangelize to travelers while simultaneously serving as a sales pitch demonstrates just one of the many ways literacy is used in a rural setting to empower its users.

We see agency in local literacy acts and in examining such local displays of literacy. As literacy educators who work and live in this rural context, we wonder how such knowledge and practices are considered by English language arts (ELA) teachers who serve these communities. Deborah Brandt’s (2001, 2015) conceptualization of *literacy sponsorship* sheds light upon the agentive forces that facilitate and benefit from others’ literacy acquisition. In applying this concept to literacy learning in the rural context, we gain a fuller understanding of how embedded influences contribute to the predominance of normative English language arts curricula. *Sponsors*, as Brandt (2009) defines them, are “any agents, local

¹ We acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that we can use when referring to individuals in our writing. Throughout this

article we use pronouns to refer to individuals that correspond with the pronouns that they use to refer to themselves.

or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (p. 19).

Literacy sponsorship, as articulated by Brandt (2009), can be either an informal or formal arrangement in which individuals are apprenticed into specific literacy practices for the benefit of both the learner and the sponsor. In this view of literacy education and acquisition, sponsorship activity exists in the wider sociopolitical and economic mechanisms at work in any educational context. The economic and social context of literacy acquisition fundamentally shapes who, what, and how literacy is learned according to Brandt. Lawrence (2015) observes that in addition to illuminating how literacy agents are contextually-bound by economic and political forces, among Brandt’s (2001) contributions is the recognition that sponsorship is not solely the result of individual activity. Institutions, technologies, and policies can also all function as literacy sponsors. Examples of individuals who serve as literacy sponsorship include teacher educators (Smith, 2014), social club leaders (Moss & Lyons-Robinson, 2014), and older relatives (Brandt, 2001). Institutions that can serve as literacy sponsors include churches (Brandt, 2001), university-community partnerships (Goldblatt & Jolliffe, 2014), and employers (Brandt, 2015).

To understand more about how literacy sponsorship is constructed in the rural context where we live and work, we conducted an inquiry into the nature of literacy sponsorship as constructed by secondary English language arts teachers using methods of critical discourse analysis (Gee, 2014a; Gee, 2014b; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). We specifically asked two questions: 1) How is literacy sponsorship shaped,

valued, and enacted by ELA teachers in a rural context? 2) What does this reveal about the forms of sponsorship that are recognized and valued in this community? Since literacy sponsorship often functions to promulgate values of the sponsor (Duffy, et al., 2014), we were interested in how literacy sponsorship in the local context conveyed macro-level values, concerns, and ideologies. Our findings speak to the discourse regarding rural learners, what was once proclaimed “the rural school problem” (Schafft & Jackson, 2010). Much has changed since the 1896 Committee of Twelve, a subcommittee of the National Education Association, issued an influential report decrying the quality and expense of rural education, which concluded that consolidation and centralized control were the remedy. Today, rural schools span the gamut from well-funded to under-resourced, from high-achieving to those in danger of being taken over by state departments of education. The diversity in the rural education experience is still largely unrecognized in education and literacy research (Eckert & Alsup, 2015), as research focusing on rural literacy learning is underrepresented in the discipline’s journals.

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Theoretical Framework

This study is predicated upon a theoretical stance that views literacy as social practices mediated by individual agency and powerful institutional forces (Brandt, 2009; Powell, 1999; Yagelski, 2000). According to Brandt (2009),

literacy as a resource becomes available to ordinary people largely through the mediations of more powerful sponsors. These sponsors are engaged in ceaseless processes of positioning and repositioning, seizing and

relinquishing control over meanings and materials of literacy as part of their participation in economic and political competition. In the give and take of these struggles, forms of literacy and literacy learning take shape. (pp. 32-33)

Understanding literacy acquisition as constrained by the local economies through which they are appropriated requires an understanding of the multiple entities that share a stake in shaping the forms of literacy that promulgate and dominate individuals' perceptions and practices (Brandt, 2009). As previously noted, schools are one site of literacy sponsorship in rural communities. They are particularly powerful sites because of the societal expectations conveyed through the material and ideological investment in schooling as a public good. As multi-faceted institutions, schools construct and share notions of literacy through policies, curriculum, and pedagogy—in the current context funneled through a lens of accountability-- that are passed on to students through school-based discourse and teachers' ideological practices. Thus, teachers and school sites serve as important mediators in how literacies are leveraged for social, cultural, and economic value within their local communities. Specific to the context of this study, the formative role rural teachers play in promoting and supplying literacy resources and practices warrants attention to the beliefs and values underwriting their conceptions and practices for literacy learning and use (Brandt, 2001).

As educators who seek to sponsor literacy in rural areas, we agree with Corbett's (2010a) assertion that it is our responsibility to use sociocultural theory as a lens to "work as hard as we can to understand social context and the layers of complexity that context, diversity, and the specificity of place introduce into our work" (p. 82). Our attention in this study is towards such an aim. We sought to understand how

literacy sponsorship is shaped and mediated through teacher discourse to develop a deeper understanding of the locally situated literacy practices within one rural community.

Literature Review

In situating our inquiry in the extant literature, we begin with examining research on sponsorship in rural contexts and then explore how rurality has been conceptualized in the education research literature. Given the long history of marginalization of rural education both as a phenomenon and a subject of scholarly inquiry, our consideration of literacy sponsorship recognizes that notions of rurality have always carried ideological weight. Brandt's concept of literacy sponsorship has been applied in several rural literacy studies. In her exploration of the effects of rural literacy stereotypes, Donehower (2007) recognized how negotiations between rural residents and their sponsors have shaped literacy learning. Examining the narratives of residents of a small Appalachian community, she identifies mismatches between sponsors external to the community and the needs and desires of community members. As a result, the individual strengths of literacy learners often went unrecognized. Potential contributions from sponsors often fell short of the kind of sustainable literacy research and sponsorship that Donehower advocates could benefit rural communities. Meyers (2012) posits that the sustainability of sponsorship can be understood as a result of an ongoing accumulation and accommodation of competing sponsors' values rather than a rejection and replacement of each sponsor's values. The underlying ideologies conveyed through literacy learning, then, may be discordant in nature.

As the research on sponsorship in rural communities illustrates, literacies in rural education are multifaceted, complex phenomena spanning formal and informal learning spaces and practices (Azano,

2011; Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2012; Eckert & Alsup, 2015; Eppley, 2011; Eppley & Corbett, 2012). Although the concept of rurality can be traced back centuries (Theobald & Wood, 2010), how rurality is theorized and operationalized is the topic of multiple scholarly debates (e.g., Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean 2005; Corbett, 2013; Koziol et al., 2015). At one end of the spectrum are quantitative definitions based on demographics and space that emphasize population distribution and distance to metropolitan areas and at the other end, socio-cultural, socio-political conceptions that emphasize rurality as a constructed identity.

Corbett (2013) posits that rurality can be conceptualized “as a space of intersections and tensions, of people and place, of people and people, of place and space, and so forth...rural is what we think it is in our various imaginary constructions” (p. 2). Given this, a one-size-fits-all approach to rural education cannot (or, at least, should not) be applied; Lester (2012) argues, “Recognizing the uniqueness of rural communities is the first step in moving forward in providing effective and culturally relevant instruction for students” (p. 413). Groenke and Nesper (2010) agree that rural spaces and the identities of those who live in such spaces are contested negotiations that mitigate local forces (rural communities) and global pressures. Rural residents may “appropriate ‘global’ tools or imagery as readily as they embrace more familiar and ‘traditional’ local practices” (Groenke & Nesper, 2010, p. 53). In spite of these dynamic and complicated realities, rurality is often dismissed through stereotypical, oversimplified perceptions held by

suburban and urban Americans who see rural as lesser.

As Theobald and Wood (2010) observe, rurality has a long association with deficit perspectives wherein to be rural is synonymous with being subpar. Donehower, Hogg, and Schell (2007) point out that “Rural Americans are often thought to be illiterate, untechnological, and simplistic” (p. 14). Citing a lack of educational and economic opportunities, Ziegler and Davis (2008) maintain that “concern for rural America is real,” (p. 25). While rural communities face legitimate challenges, the deficit-perspective

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views that still permeate popular culture and mainstream media are coupled with the lack of rural presence in educational research and curricular materials, thus leaving rural educators largely forgotten and sometimes ill-equipped to maximize students’ literacy potentials. “Rural issues are simply not on the radar screen,” Lester (2012) writes (p. 408). Educational research tends to cater to urban and suburban norms, idealizing the notion of city, whereas rural experiences are

erased, denied, or deemed unimportant (Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2007, p. 14)

So deeply ingrained is this view of rural as lesser in American culture, rural students commonly “have internalized and believe in this stereotype,” as evidenced by the fear expressed in the not unfrequent statement “my country teachers didn’t teach me right,” a saying communicated to Donehower over the years from various college students of rural backgrounds (Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2007, p. 161). Theobald and Wood (2010) relate

a similar tale of self-fulfilling prophecy, writing of a rural student's address to a room full of rural educators and stakeholders. The students' comments, which positioned rural schools and teachers as sub-par, were met with "no protest, no rebuttal" (p. 17), lending support to the authors' conclusion that "rural equals backward is an old cultural message, but its age hasn't diminished its utility" (p. 31). The sticking power of this perception is remarkable, given the twin recognitions that rural education is often described from a deficit perspective and that rural education is underrepresented in scholarship are well documented in the literature (Eckert and Alsup, 2015; Longhurst, 2012; Schafft & Jackson, 2010; Tieken, 2014).

Compounding the naïve perception of rural education is the material reality that K-12 curricula, which are characterized by urban and suburban worldviews, often present content or pedagogy that is irrelevant in the lives of rural students (Corbett, 2010b; Edmondson & Butler, 2010). Cormack (2013) offers an example of irrelevant curriculum in the lives of rural students, citing a science teacher who noted that traffic issues, pollution, and other required topics catered to the urban student. Edmondson & Butler (2010) describe math problems in a popular textbook that require students to examine house numbers to determine whether they are even or odd, pointing out that the publishers had not considered that many rural students don't live in houses with numbers, or even in areas that would have neighbors with whom they could compare house numbers if they did indeed have them. Theobald and Wood (2010) also note college-level textbook discrepancies that impact potential rural educators: "Anti-rural bias frequently comes out in textbooks commonly used in teacher preparation programs. Most often it exists merely as omission; the idea that some schools are small and rural never emerges as a topic for study or discussion" (p. 28). These examples are illustrative of

a larger hegemonic curriculum that others and neglects rural populations, thus perpetuating myths and misunderstandings.

Donehower (2007) observes that literacy has the power to manage and reconfigure relationships and social networks, which, when it comes to rural literacies, have been "suffused with a long history of stereotyping and of the problematic purposes of modernizing, preserving, or abandoning rural communities" (p. 69). When not being demeaned or ignored, rurality has a reputation for being romanticized and idealized. Eckert and Alsup (2015) summarize the binary thinking common to discourses of rurality, naming "the dominant narratives describing rural life" as either "disdain of an archaic impoverished lifestyle" or "nostalgia for a lost, peaceful existence" (p. 1). The nostalgic view, described by Donehower, Hogg, and Schell (2007) as "romantic" and "unified," offers "no basis on which to make sound decisions about, or interpretations of, rural literacy and education" (p. 46). Edmondson and Butler (2010) also caution against this romantic view of rurality, claiming that "conservative designs of rural education are not a particularly hopeful project because they are rooted in a wish to return to a past that is not possible to recreate" (p. 159). Like the deficit view, romanticized views of rurality are pervasive, oversimplified stereotypes which deny rural contexts rich and multifaceted heritages, practices, and people.

A welcome development, then, is more recent literature that validates rural education as sites of powerful transformative practices (Bartsch, 2008; Corbett, 2010b; Edmondson & Butler, 2010; Lester, 2012). In the preface to a collection of narratives that refute problematic rural stereotypes, Eckert and Alsup (2015) maintain that the lived experiences of mid- to late-career rural teachers can offer all teachers insight into navigating pedagogical values in the community context.

Moreover, innovation exists not only in transformative local literacy practices that reach into communities but also within classroom spaces. Thus, we draw upon Eckert and Alsup's (2015) contention that rural literacy teachers have a "unique capacity" (p. 5) to act as agents who foster literacy within school and community contexts while valuing local funds of knowledge. Eckert and Alsup assert that "alternative narrative rural voices" of literacy teachers throughout the country can interrupt and contest the dominant narratives that portray rurality as backward and impoverished or nostalgically romantic (p. 1). Narratives such as the ones collected by Eckert and Alsup show us that there is much to be learned from careful examination of rural teachers' perspectives. Connelly and Clandinin (2000) have pointed out that a teacher knows their content area in terms of their professional knowledge landscape—that is, understanding of curriculum is dependent upon context. Connelly and Clandinin have maintained that content coverage and structure are "fluid, personal, and social" rather than "true, immutable, and external," and that content knowledge is explored as the teacher knows it (p. 330). Because "every teacher works in a particular setting in which things are known in certain ways" (p. 322), a teacher's perspective will be reflective of his landscape. This may be especially true of teachers whose classrooms are located in rural communities that often value place, community, and connection with the land. Teachers' perspectives offer us analytic lenses that are shaped by these differing professional knowledge landscapes.

Place not only influences the way teachers think about content, it shapes their interactions with students. As McGhie-Richmond, Irvine, Loreman, Cizman, and Lupart (2013) have concluded, teachers

in rural communities tend to have high visibility in beyond-school social places such as grocery stores or churches due to the limited number of shared social and economic spaces available in many rural communities. Perhaps this aspect of rural teaching—that of educators as being prominent in out-of-school settings—contributes to their agency when it comes to fostering literacy. As is often expressed in the literature when we look at teacher perspectives, relationships are key (Eckert & Alsup, 2015; Tieken, 2014).

Methods of Inquiry

Methodological Framework

Our methodological approach is based in critical discourse analysis (Gee, 2014a; Rogers, 2011; van Dijk, 2011; Wodak & Myer, 2009), which studies the social functioning of language use with particular attention to how language constructs power relationships and ideological realities. As others have argued, discourse analysis in education is not a strict set of methods; it is, instead, an inquiry stance that draws upon a range of scholarly traditions from diverse fields including linguistics, communication studies, semiotics, and cultural studies (Florio-Ruane & Morrell, 2011; Rogers, 2011). Discourse in this sense is a "multidimensional social phenomenon" (van Dijk, 2014, p. 67) that includes linguistic, social, material, and semiotic cues.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) of how sign systems construct social experience is evidenced in the wide range of CDA scholarship in literacy education (e.g., Perry, 2008; Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & Joseph, 2005). These studies draw upon and extend theories of meaning-making, providing insight into how shifting and contested understandings are inherent in communicative

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processes. CDA recognizes that individuals act as agents who may or may not disrupt accepted ways of doing and being—what Gee terms big “D” discourse (Gee, 2014a).

In surfacing dimensions of power enacted through discourse, CDA calls our attention to how everyday language encounters convey information beyond the immediate connotation or communicative intent. Central to our investigation was consideration of Brandt’s (2001) notion of literacy sponsorship. Because we recognized that literacy is constructed and propagated by social institutions (Barton & Hamilton, 2000), we wanted to explore how the specific social institutions of school and rural community were understood by participants as sites of literacy learning. Sociocultural literacy research has unequivocally demonstrated that literacy learning takes place out of school as well. Given this, it becomes important to consider what forms of literacy sponsorship are recognized and valued in a rural education context.

Study Context

This investigation took place in three separate rural communities—Addison, Northwood, and Shelby (pseudonyms)—in a geographically distinct area of the mid- Atlantic region. These communities, known for their agriculture, waterways, tourism, small towns, and industrial pockets of urbanization, are located in three different counties spanning two states; all are found on the same peninsula. One secondary school serving a primarily rural population is located in each of the communities. These three schools serve students who live in the immediate vicinity as well as students who live in hamlets and unincorporated areas within geographic proximity to the school. Overall, using the terminology of the school districts, the schools consist of predominantly Caucasian student populations. Using reporting categories from the local education authority,

Northwood is the least diverse of our three schools, with approximately 15% of the population identified as African-American, 9% other races, and the remainder Caucasian. Shelby is also mostly Caucasian, with 30% of the population identifying as African-American and 10% other races. Addison High School differs, serving a more diverse population of 40% Caucasian students, 40% African-American, and close to 20% Hispanic/Latino.

Participants

We used several approaches to data collection to surface the nature of literacy sponsorship in these rural communities. Because secondary English language arts teachers are significant sponsors of literacy (Smith, 2014), we were interested in their perspectives on literacy learning in the communities in which they work. Using purposive sampling (Patton, 2002), we recruited a total of eight teacher participants the three secondary schools. Participants were selected to represent a range of diversity in years of service (from three to twenty-eight years) and their home location relative to the school in which they taught. Four of the participants lived in the rural community in which they taught, three lived in a small city within commuting distance of their respective schools, and one lived in a small town in the county. All of them identified as long-term residents of the area.

To gain the student perspective, we used convenience sampling to solicit eight student participants from Northwood, where we had permission to interview students. Five of the students identified as White, two as African-American, and one as Multiracial. They ranged in grade level from 6th to 10th grade.

Data Sources

To consider the participants’ language-in-use as means of their construction of literacy in a rural context, we collected multiple examples of discourse.

A semi-structured interview was conducted with each student and teacher participant. The interviews, lasting from 45-60 minutes, were co-constructed explorations of how literacy is enacted in the specific context of the participants' rural school community. We recognized that multiple subjectivities are present in interview situations and that power dimensions are implicated in the researcher-participant relationship. We addressed this through treating the interviews as conversational encounters (Wood & Kroger, 2000) that provided "an arena for identifying and exploring participants' interpretative practices" (Potter, 1996, p. 20). This grounded us in an understanding of discourse analysis that rejects discursive practices as distinct from informants' experiences and traditions. To see how literacy was enacted in the classroom context, we conducted a total of 15 observations in six classrooms (scheduling prevented us from being able to observe in all eight classrooms). During the observations, we focused on how literacy was constructed in the curriculum and in social interaction. In addition, we specifically looked for ways in which the rural community context was addressed.

Because sponsorship is present in contexts beyond individual relationships, we conducted an environmental print literacy scan to gather evidence of literacy sponsorship as reflected in discourse-in-place (Pahl and Rowsell, 2012; Scollon & Scollon, 2003). Drawing on sociocultural perspectives that recognize the dynamic presence of literacy in everyday environments (e.g., Kirkland & Hull, 2010; Neuman & Celano, 2001), we visited each community several times, spending time in the commercial center and public places to gather photographic images of literacy in place including signs, store window displays, community event flyers, and displays of books about the area.

The final source of discourse data in our study was the print texts we collected from both the community

and classroom context. We observed print sources of the individual students, the classroom (textbooks, posters, student work), the school and the community to see how literacy sponsorship was at work. For example, students provided and read aloud their own personal essays and poems during interviews.

Though some of the environmental print and place-based texts are appealing to visitors to the area (canoe guides, for example), these texts are written by community members and are often connected to the production of financial capital for the community. Thus, these texts very much are community-based. Rather than treating the document data as discrete entities as is the case in some discourse analysis of written material (Goldman & Wiley, 2011), the texts were included in the larger corpus of data we analyzed using a thematic approach.

Data Analysis

Adopting a concurrent model of data analysis (Merriam, 1998; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014), we engaged in ongoing data analysis from initial collection through the writing of this manuscript using a multi-cycle analytic approach described by Saldaña (2013). First, interview data was transcribed using prose conventions and structure (Juzwik, 2012). We then coded each interview using a combination of process and in vivo codes to get a general sense of the data and to contribute to the development of a dialectical coding scheme derived inductively from the data and deductively from the theoretical framework informing our study. From this, we generated a codebook which we then used to recode all of the transcribed data. Example codes include "ST: Lit Strength" applied to instances of data (transcripts, images, and documents) that indicate positive attribute of students' literacy habits/abilities and "CY: Lit Prac" applied to data about literacy practices in the community. Each interview was

coded independently by two team members to provide for multiple checks on interpretation of the codes and data.

Throughout first and second-cycle coding, we adopted an approach grounded in “dialogical intersubjectivity” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 37) in which we reached consensus on code properties through discussion. We drew upon research memos and team discussions to reach consensus on coding applications when differentially coded instances of data appeared in our analysis and to identify overarching patterns across the growing data set (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) to develop conceptual categories. Examples of these categories include “Place-conscious actions” and “RD: relationship-driven.” The categories served as a catalyst for research memos and team discussions. Through this iterative process, we became deeply familiar with the corpus of the data and developed a shared understanding of emergent themes.

Gee (2014a) and Gibson and Brown (2011) are among scholars who posit that in CDA inquiry, the methods for analysis of language-based texts may also be used with visual data. Recognizing that in analyzing the visual and documentary data we would be using language to create and convey meaning, we drew upon Saldaña’s (2013) recommendation of recording holistic interpretations and impressions prior to applying formal codes. We did this through verbal discussion of the images in our research team meetings and later coded the data using codes from the codebook.

As residents of the area, we are familiar with an emic view that conceptualizes the villages, small towns, and individual homesteads as belonging to a shared geographic and cultural entity characterized by a regional rural identity. Given this identity, we approached our data as sources of information that could tell a collective story about literacy sponsorship

in the region. This is not to imply that there are not distinguishing features of each of the three community hubs. Rather, the congruencies between data were so strong that it became apparent to us that the literacy sponsorship was constructed similarly in the three communities, thereby speaking to a larger regional phenomenon. Recognizing that, as Gee (2014a, 2014b) argues, validity in discourse analysis is not a fixed characteristic of a study, but rather analyses are contributions to ongoing inquiry and understanding of a phenomenon, we grounded our methodological approaches in accepted practices of establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research including triangulation of data and methods, use of peer debriefings, reflexivity, and clear description of analysis.

In presenting participant quotes in the findings section of this article, we modified an approach used by Corbett, Brett, and Hawkins (2017). Each quote is followed by a code indicating the gender of the speaker (M or F, as all of the participants identified within a binary heteronormative framework), the community school in which the speaker works (S for Shelby, N for Northwood, A for Addison), and an identification number. Uppercase codes indicate teachers and lowercase indicates students. For example, the code “M-N-2” indicates a male teacher from Northwood labeled as number two of the Northwood male teachers and “f-N-1” indicates a female student from Northwood.

Findings

School as Sponsor

The data we gathered consistently pointed to the primacy of the institution of school as the context for literacy sponsorship, disrupting from the outset what we conceptualized as literacy-rich practices, spaces, and sponsors including community websites, local history archives, and community newspapers.

One teacher put it bluntly: “I am not aware of anything outside of the classroom or outside the high school setting . . . where a student is willing to or maybe even being approached by literacy” (M-A-1). In some ways, perhaps this is not surprising. If schooling does not function to promote development of students’ reading, writing, speaking, and listening capacities, then surely a defining aspect of formal education has not been realized. What was surprising to us, though, was the extent to which literacy sponsorship had been exclusively associated with school in the views of the teacher participants. As another participant put it, “I’m trying to think about reading opportunities, other than what we have in the building. [Pause] I don’t really know of any” (F-N-1). Similarly, institutionalized spaces were the only context for reading or writing opportunities according to another participant: “Beyond the public library and the after-school programs we offer here, I can’t think of any” (F-S-1).

Within the institutional space of school, voluntary literacy learning occurred through teacher sponsorship of book clubs and essay contests. Three student participants singled out after-school literacy clubs as being particularly important to their literacy lives. One recounted, “I love to read. Like I love reading and actually I do a book club every Wednesday with my English teacher” (f-N-2) while another lamented that she was not able to join the book club this year because her grade point average precluded her eligibility. One of the boys participated in the drama club in middle school though as a high school student he no longer participated in school-sponsored literacy learning beyond the classroom context. Overall, the student sentiment reflected the teachers: “You have to go to town” (m-N-3) if you want books, newspapers, computers or other commonly recognized literacy artifacts.

Challenging the view that literacy is absent in rural places, Lester (2012) and Waller and Barrentine (2015) recognize literacy as naturally occurring phenomena in rural communities. Supporting that understanding, our community observations revealed a wealth of literacy in place. From local newspapers to author readings at a local bookstore to blogs celebrating the regional lifestyle to historical documents written by area residents, we found multiple place-based texts in the community context. In unpacking the discrepancy between what we observed and the teachers’ discourse, we came to understand two facets of the construction of school-based literacy sponsorship: 1) the centrality of relationships as the foundation for sponsorship and 2) the hegemonic sponsorship of normative English language arts curriculum.

Positive relationships as central to literacy sponsorship. One condition of sponsorship is the centrality of interpersonal relationships in the community. From the teachers’ and students’ perspectives, the community was defined both by its rurality and the relationships of people within the community. This was especially important for the teachers. Referring to the 1960s era fictional town of TV show fame, one teacher described her community as “Mayberry. Rural. Close-Knit. Sheltered” (F-S-2). Phrases like “very supportive and very close knit” (F-N-1) or “tight-knit” (F-S-3) were used by participants to characterize their community. The participants positioned rural community as distinct from the perceived outside world. For the teachers, this was important because it directly impacted how they experienced their jobs. Teacher participants articulated a perception that they had fewer behavior problems to contend with because of the nature of the rural community: “Our behavior problems here stay small, and I think our kids are exposed to less” (F-S-2). Relationships were an important source of student motivation:

I think that the kids can sense that and they want to do their best for us. They come in and try, so they might not like reading and they might not want to read at home. But for the most part when you have them in class like they'll do what you ask them to do. And they'll try. (F-N-2)

Students also spoke to relationships as the most important aspect of their community, citing long-term friends and a feeling of safety in schools; as one commented, "It is a small and quiet area. And not a lot of problems go around. Easy to work with" (m-N-4). These relationships were observed on multiple occasions during observations in the classroom setting as students were often sharing written responses to texts with one another and discussing various aspects of a reading selection with the teacher's prompting. The students' comfort level and knowledge of each other was aided by the fact that many of the high school students have been together in the same classes since sixth grade.

Several noted the connection they have with teachers: "Going here, you develop a relationship with the teachers, and they, I feel like they know your strengths and your weaknesses here so they know how to like help you, in terms of reading and writing" (f-N-4). Another noted making an effort to please teachers: "They're nice, but they do fun incentives and stuff if you get good grades and stuff" (m-N-2). For other students, it was a sense of security that was most valued; one asserted that his rural school does a better job of teaching than his former non-rural school due to its calm climate and the teachers' academic focus.

Several of the participants credited parents as positive influences on their students' behavior. One teacher described the school community as a "loving

environment" with "a lot of parental support and that definitely plays a big role in student behavior and attitudes" (F-N-3). The nature of participants' views of parental support and relationships was complicated, however. Parental support seemed to be valued for regulating student behavior and student attitudes, as opposed to sponsoring literacy learning. One teacher surmised, "You have to understand that community. As long as you get to the diploma it doesn't matter what you've learned or haven't learned, how much you've grown or haven't grown" (M-N-1). When parents were seen as specifically supporting literacy learning, it largely related to whether or not they were assisted in providing access to books or helping with homework.

A striking contrast to this was that students identified a number of ways their families acted as sponsors as literacy activities. One shared how she memorized large portions of scripture with her mother; another regularly discussed

“What is striking in our study is that teachers saw the rurality of the community as an asset.”

books with her sister. One student described a robust family literacy practice on holidays and in African-American History Month in which members of his family read African-American histories and biographies and then shared them: "We'll get a bio, we'll gather information about them, what they did to help Black people, what they did altogether, and then we will get back and talk about it at dinner" (m-N-1). Another described his father taking him to a library of sorts to find books for recreational reading, "This lady, she is kind of old and she has like an apartment with books everywhere! It's her house. She's got shelves set up. I would say there are at least, like, I don't know, like four thousand books" from which he was able to select (m-N-2). Another assisted his father with their haunted house business by creating and running a website to advertise and share information about it. Although each student's

family situation was unique, in each case, a positive relationship with family members served as a supporting factor in their literacy experiences that was largely unrecognized by their teachers.

A distant sponsor overshadows local

literacies. Research has spoken clearly about a frequent disconnect between in- and out-of-school literacies (e.g., Hull and Schultz, 2002). What is striking in our study is that teachers saw the rurality of the community as an asset. They highly valued relationships with students, parents, and the wider community. However, they did not see the wider community as sponsoring literacy, even when the literacy practices evident in the publicly visible discourses appeared similar to school-based literacy practices. For example, a local business owned by one of the student participant's family offered ghost tours to various sites in the region by utilizing folklore, oral history, and oral performance to tell stories of place. A recreational equipment retail and rental business had a number of books specific to the region for sale (including popular canoe and kayaking guides) that were relevant to another student's recreational pursuits. Townships in all three communities have websites featuring local history and links to local museums. From oral performance to reading books to evaluating websites for accuracy, these examples mirror student engagement in school literacy practices. Yet, teachers did not recognize these resources as ones that counted when asked about literacy.

Similarly, students did not see local literacies as meriting recognition as sources for reading and writing. The students struggled to identify ways that reading and writing were present in their community beyond their family, though several noted signs and books for sale in a local store. Consistently in the participants' language use, the existence—let alone pedagogical potential—of local literacies was eclipsed by the construction of literacy

as a school-based endeavor. In turn, this solidified the role of schools and teachers as sponsors of literacy. Teacher and student conceptions of what counts as literacy eclipsed the richness of place-based literacy, and, thus, reflected the compelling power of national and state curricular norms and assessment culture.

It was in the teachers' discourse about curriculum that the role of testing and tradition became most apparent, as participants' language-in-use characterized literacy learning as informed by and conforming to assessment-driven curricula. Concern with standardized testing was woven throughout the teachers' discourse, mirroring Cormack's (2013) assertion that standardized testing creates a significant barrier to rural teachers' pedagogical innovation. As one teacher put it in mid-March, "You know, with all the testing we've done this year, we're over testing. We started over testing in September and we're not done yet" (F-N-1). Another teacher reflected how assessment pressure was even incorporated into relationship building:

One of the things I always do is check SRI, which is their reading scores for Lexile's, out, which is a nice baseline to know if they're reading at, above, or below their grade level. It's nice that that's tracked individually as well, so that when we take it during the school year I can take a moment and say, "Well you've gone up twenty points," or "You stayed the same," or "You've gone down fifteen." Give them an idea of where they are. I also make sure that they know what that number means in terms of being on or above grade level, and then connect that to the standardized testing with what used to be HSA once now becoming PARCC where their reading materials will be selected. So that they have a reason, you know I should be

reading at twelve-fifty level because I have to take this test. (M-N-1)

In the same community where the bumper sticker “We’re Rural, Not Stupid” was seen on local vehicles, the schools displayed their yearly accreditation and assessment data for three months of the year, visible on large signs to all the community. As a teacher observed, test scores were a reflection of the school as a whole: “The scores don’t just reflect on the teacher, they reflect on the school.” (F-N-1) This discourse, while centered upon relationships, defines these relationships in terms of the obligation to nurture students’ abilities to perform well on assessments of student learning that are devoid of any recognition of local literacies. While the teachers benefit from this arrangement both in terms of employment and job satisfaction, a more lucrative benefit is derived by testing companies and curriculum publishers.

In addition to a concern with test preparation, curricular materials and decisions reflected what a canonical curriculum that is both normative and homogenizing. An example of this is the “Holocaust Units” which were taught both at the middle school and high school. Consider a teacher’s reflection:

One of my students actually asked me when they were talking about lining up the survivors of Auschwitz, and when they were talking about them being on cattle cars and talking about the cramped condition of the quarters, they were able to say, “Oh, so this is a lot like slavery. This is a lot like being an African-American in America in 1834 or 1860.” Yeah, of course, absolutely, so they were able to make that connection, and that was actually a really good moment. That was a great teaching moment because I was able to expand on that, too. (M-A-1)

The connection made between the student, the teacher, and the curriculum reflects the activation of the learner’s schema. The curricula do not include the history of the Underground Railroad that existed within the region. Despite the availability of texts exploring this history, literacy education practices in these communities were about adherence to policies, externally-derived curricula, and testing. As one teacher explained about the curriculum, “The text is the same. The stories that I pull, I’d still pull in town” (F-N-2). Another teacher explained that she liked to bring in texts that related to students’ interests, but that this was not supported by her district. She noted, “This year we went with a textbook program. I don’t feel like that necessarily reflects our small community and that’s a county initiative” (F-S-2). Indeed, the classroom observations featured students reading widely taught texts such as *The Odyssey*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. Writing activities included sonnet writing, a compare and contrast essay between two books, and working with graphic organizers. These canonical curriculum artifacts are powerful sponsors of literacy in these rural communities.

As others (e.g., Picciano & Spring, 2013) have articulated, testing companies and curriculum publishers derive profit from the current education paradigm. It is important to name the function of curriculum and the companies peddling it as agents of literacy sponsorship. Thus, we understand the dynamics of literacy education in the rural communities in this study. Inherent in the marketability of products and ideas is the need for a large consumer base. Localization, particularly in regard to rural regions, by its very nature runs counter to this need. Given that rurality is often associated with deficit perspectives wherein to be rural is synonymous with being subpar (Theobald & Wood, 2010), it is understandable that communities

would embrace curriculum that elides localism in favor of a normative canonical curriculum.

Discussion and Implications

Across the discursive space of this study, we found a strong pedagogical logic underlying the participants sponsored literacy learning as a generic experience, untethered to specific places, times, and meanings. This a-contextual notion of literacy perpetuates what Butler and Edmondson (2012) refer to as the “commonplace” (p. 227) discourses of dominant culture, a discourse that is difficult to interrupt in rural contexts: “[T]here is a strong public discourse that values standardized curriculum reflecting suburban and urban lifestyles, accompanied by both implicit and explicit messages that rural children should aspire to this standard knowledge” (p. 228). Teachers in rural schools are perhaps particularly compelled towards conformity if, in the eyes of the community, that conformity has led to success. If the relationships between teachers and the community can be leveraged, as is the case in this study, to moderate student behavior in ways that are congruent with positive outcomes, then such relationships serve a purpose in the larger work of literacy sponsorship.

Understanding the teachers’ pedagogical logic in conforming to state and national curricular norms means recognizing their commitment to the community. Instead of seeking out local texts, they are demonstrating their professionalism, their caring, and their trustworthiness as stewards of the educational trust enacted in these communities. Their pedagogical logic preempts accusations that somehow they “didn’t teach right” (Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2007) as they nurture positive relationships and expose students to texts associated

with strong cultural capital. This arrangement is one that seems to work in the contexts of this study because it reflects what Edmondson and Butler (2010) identify as a neoliberal design for rural teaching:

Neoliberal designs on rural teaching recreate educators as agents for multinational corporations as they deliver prepackaged curriculum and standards aligned with high-stakes tests. . . . A neoliberal design is increasingly the expectation in rural communities as education policies are created with market-driven goals in mind, including an emphasis on providing students with skills and opportunities needed to compete in a globalized world. (p. 162)

As critical literacy educators we struggle with the

“Understanding the teachers’ pedagogical logic in conforming to state and national curricular norms means recognizing their commitment to the community.”

potential of place-conscious curriculum in our communities. We hear stories about a high school student hosing down equipment during a late-night shift at the chicken processing plant; we read

about the tension between the region’s farmers and watermen as they debate the impact agricultural fertilizer has on their respective livelihoods; and we drive past historic plantations that still echo with the voices of the once enslaved. Where we see place-based literacies offering a wealth of material for exploration, our public-school colleagues perhaps see unrest. This recognition is important: Exploring local issues raises potential for the disruption of the relationships that teachers and communities value (Corbett, 2010b). Implementing curricula based on local literacies would not so much offer a metaphorical window on issues as it would take down the sides of the building, exposing everyone to the wider, contested landscape in which the

economic entanglements of literacy sponsorship would likely become more apparent.

The potential of such disruption jeopardizes the benefits derived from literacy sponsorship as constructed in these communities. Brandt (2015) reminds us that literacy sponsorship is not selfless: “Sponsors are entities who need our literacy as much or more than we do” (p. 331). We see teachers benefiting from their sponsorship activity both materially (in the form of compensation) and psycho-socially as they derive affirmation and enjoyable relationships from their work. In the deeper background, we see textbook publishers and testing companies benefiting financially. Enfolding this, we see a global economy in which literacies flourish as new technologies push on and emerge from diverse, widely-dispersed sponsors. All of the sponsors derive benefits—and need the literacies of the sponsored—to sustain their work.

Must this fulfillment of community expectations come at the cost of teachers’ freedom to personalize curricula to include local literacy capital? Fowler (2013) notes that “as soon as a high standard is recognized and rewarded, many people abandon their freedom of expression in order to compete for the rewards offered for ‘excellence” (p. 105). In the rural contexts we examined, teachers may not have willingly abandoned creative and innovative place-conscious pedagogies so much as they were never given an opportunity to explore such practices in the first place. As Corbett (2010b) has written regarding a rural context as represented by its local school, “Not surprisingly we found that there was little actual local content or recognizable local representation, and that if we wanted to look at the school as a large text, it was fundamentally a story about somewhere else” (p. 117).

How might the findings of this study tell a different story, a story that reflects a pedagogy of spatial

justice (Vaughan, Woodard, Phillips, & Taylor, 2018) addressed in the local context? Given the centrality of interpersonal relationships in the community, challenging the normative curriculum must start with honoring the shared interest the community has in educational outcomes. It would be naïve for us to posit that if only teachers in rural communities would challenge the normative curriculum, change could occur. Teachers and families need to know that their relationships can be deepened through collectively examining the nature of literacy sponsorship in community literacies. Including community literacy resources and practices in the curriculum is one aspect of this, though it needs to extend to consideration of who is benefiting from literacy practices, how, and for what purpose. This will, by necessity, require a level of discomfort as literacy is always bound up in larger social and economic arrangements. Thus, policy advocacy should start with community activism at the state and local level as it is an unfair proposition to expect rural ELA teachers to disrupt the symbiotic relationship between them and their communities. We also must recognize that generating change has always been hard and risky work which has often been accomplished through large-scale communities of action. Rural teachers, by the very nature of their context, lack direct access to such communities, so it is incumbent on the larger community of critical literacy educators to address rural learners as central to our collective work at both the policy and research level.

For literacy scholars, one aspect of this work should be consideration of the intersections and points of divergence between rural and urban literacy research with specific attention to the rich and varied ways that youth engage in literacy practices that extend and even speak back to the meaning of school literacy (Kinloch, 2011). Teacher education programs can engage in this work through making it an explicit focus of study (e.g., Cormack, 2013). In

addition, college faculty can collaborate with rural educators to implement action research projects predicated upon place-based critical literacy (Harned, 2018). In an era when it is sometimes difficult to believe that change is possible, we must be steadfast in our efforts to listen with care and advocate with commitment.

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