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## Understanding Rural Communities: Crafting Local Inquiries as Praxis for Pre-Service ELA Students in Teaching Composition

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## Research Article

# Understanding Rural Communities: Crafting Local Inquiries as Praxis for Pre-Service and Early Career/Inservice ELA Teachers

Cathie English

*This study focused upon a sequence of three inquiry assignments with pre-service teachers (PSTs) in English language arts in an advanced composition and theory methods course. Place conscious and critical literacy scholars argue for a deeper understanding of rural lifeways and note the deficit or lesser than assumptions associated with rural communities and the need to develop a critical rural literacy to address the specific needs of rural educators as well as address the long-standing stereotypes. This study's purpose was to determine if these inquiry tools can be used to teach PSTs a critical literacy that can be applied in rural contexts. This qualitative study used a critical action research methodology within a bounded system, or a case study of an individual course in one semester. Data collected from the methods course included assignment artifacts, reflections, and interview transcripts. The participants included five white female PSTs in ELA. Data analysis determined four predominant themes emerging from the assignment artifacts: self-knowledge, multiple expert sources, local sources, and critical problem-based inquiries. These themes represent PST's understanding of effective inquiry tools that can lead to a critical rural literacy.*

Emphasizing rurality for people beyond rural communities is crucial...since deficit-laden stereotypes and representations of rural people and places dominate popular culture and media...Given these troubling depictions, it becomes imperative that teachers provide a way for students who both do and do not live, experience, or understand rural to have tools to speak back to these diminished representations.

—Rob Petrone and Allison Wynhoff Olsen

### Introduction

I am an ELA teacher educator at a mid-size university in the Midwest, in the state's third most populous city (population 475,000) with the state's largest school district. Most of our future teachers of language arts will secure jobs in small towns. Over the past five years, nearly 47 % of our graduates began their careers in rural schools (compared to 27 % urban and 26 % who choose another career or graduate studies). Within the last two years, students in our program's intermediate methods course, along with faculty, crafted social justice descriptions for a framework for teaching that included four key concepts, i.e., *critically caring*, *critically designing curriculum*, *critically engaging difference*, and *critically communicating*. Our program's values, approaches, and mission include advocating for socially just ELA instruction. Our pre-service and inservice teachers have a growing understanding of social justice theories and the practices they can enact

in their classrooms. They have read (and seemingly embraced) critical literacy and social justice scholars. Our program guides PSTs to understand the connection between critical literacy and social justice, i.e., critical literacy is an important tool to enact social justice. Teaching adolescents to engage in critical literacy is a vital component of understanding social justice. Most theorists of critical literacy and social justice are centered upon urban settings; however, most of our preservice teachers (PSTs) begin their careers as rural English/language arts (ELA) teachers. As a teacher educator committed to critical rural literacy pedagogies, I wondered how I could challenge or shape PSTs to become citizen-scholars who encourage their future secondary students to become advocates for equity and social justice in rural spaces. What does a critical *rural* literacy look like? What do these future teachers need to know? How do I help them understand the complexity of rural spaces and how to 'speak back' to 'less than' stereotypes of rurality? Rural spaces have no lack of equity or social justice issues: poverty and its inherent struggles, i.e., proper nutrition, access to effective medical, dental, vision and mental health treatment, transportation, job and economic opportunities, and, of course, educational resources and well-trained educators. Knowing one's community and the people in it is paramount when teachers seek to teach in rural spaces, because the culture of small towns is vastly different than urban

or suburban communities (Azan and Stewart 2015; Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen 2021; Tieken 2014).

In Fall 2020, as I prepared to teach our composition theory and practice course (part of our program's core curriculum), I wondered if having PSTs engage in inquiry practices would encourage them to develop critical literacy about rurality. My premise was that demonstrating, modeling, and enacting inquiry tools in a composition methods course could help pre-service and early career in-service teachers develop their inquiry skills.

The initial inquiry that early career teachers must make upon entering a rural community is of the community itself. As a former secondary ELA teacher in a rural school district, I understood, after 21 years, that to practice in rural spaces, I needed to be aware of stereotypes, know my community deeply and understand the norms and cultures of my specific community and expectations of my fellow teachers. As a former secondary rural educator, my level of student care increased and the demands upon my time extended beyond classroom and contract hours. As a teacher in a rural community, I was considered an expert, and my expertise was drawn upon in several capacities. I also had to learn that staying in a rural community was not failure—that success was for the community and not just the individual. Inquiry tools were essential for my work in a remote rural school in conjunction with the National Writing Project and the U.S. Department of Education's College Ready Writer's Program (2013-2015). Because I was immersed in work with rural teachers of writing, I saw firsthand some of the inequities in literacy practices due to lack of resources and professional development. In the first year of the program, it became apparent that before we could increase the college readiness of secondary student writers, we had to further develop the inquiry and writing skills of ELA teachers. This work with rural educators increased my own critical rural literacy and helped me become a more socially just educator.

This study, then, is an examination of a sequence of three inquiry assignments that PSTs participated in and the effect my own modeling of these inquiry tools had upon their learning and an understanding of a critical rural literacy. The questions that guided this study were: 1) What inquiry tools do PSTs use to examine their communities and local issues, and 2) How might these inquiry tools prepare PSTs to develop their critical literacy and thrive as teachers in rural spaces?

## Review of Literature

Hass and Nachtigal (1998) write that “we have forgotten that the top priority of schools is to serve the public good. What do students need to know about living well in their communities? How does this affect them in the present and future?” (p. vi). They advocate for a deeper understanding of rural “lifeways” by instilling five senses into our students: a sense of place or living well ecologically, a sense of connection, or living well spiritually, a sense of worth or living well economically, a sense of belonging or living well in community, and a sense of civic involvement or living well politically. They note that living well depends upon the connections people have with one another and their surroundings, and it's a “conscious choice, not a matter of happenstance, genetics, or economic class” (p.vi). David Greenwood (2019) adapts Wattoch and Brown's (2011) practices for place consciousness in six ways: “being present in, with, and to a place; experiencing place stories; exploring the politics of place; apprenticing ourselves to places; caring for places; and representing places” (p. 365). Being present in, with and to a place involves people, land, and other species, i.e., humans, fauna, flora, and natural resources. It means listening to the stories of the inhabitants and familiarizing oneself with who has the power in the community and why, in order to effect changes in policies. It means to actively learn more about a place, to grow and care deeply about it and represent it fully and honestly. Robert Brooke (2003) calls this kind of living well, *intradependence* or when people gain knowledge “about their natural and cultural region to fashion lives that enhance the communities located there” (p.13). To develop a critical rural literacy, place consciousness is essential; how can students understand and make meaning of a rural literacy without consciousness of rural places?

Donehower, Hogg, and Schell (2007) define rural literacies as “particular kinds of literate skills needed to achieve the goals of sustaining life in rural areas...to pursue the opportunities and create the public policies and economic opportunities needed to sustain rural communities” (4). They note that different kinds of literacy skills are needed in rural spaces that differ from urban and suburban spaces because jobs in rural spaces require specific skills for that rural context. Donehower (2007) writes, “literacy sponsors in rural areas have an obligation to do research, to determine the specifics of local literacies situated in particular contexts” (70). Schell (2007) sees critical literacy “as a way to help students and

communities move toward creating knowledgeable literate citizens with the ‘knowledge and skills for social and environmental justice’” (82). Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen (2021) call for a critical rural English pedagogy. They write:

[It]emphasizes textual consumption, production, and distribution in order to draw attention to power dynamics, representation, ideologies, social justice/equity issues, and activism...[it] offers a way to facilitate students’ reading and writing of ‘the word and the world’ with a particular emphasis on rurality. (p. 7)

They point out that teacher educators need to foster an understanding of how to dispel the stereotypes and myths about rural communities. Other scholars also address these deficits or lesser than assumptions or the “romantic nostalgia...that ‘rural’ is equated with uncomplicated simplicity, with some sort of lost golden age of rural communities” (Tieken, 2014). This scholarship focuses upon the need to enact a critical rural literacy to address the specific needs of rural educators as well as address the long-standing stereotypes (see also, Azano, 2011, 2015; Eckert & Alsup, 2015; Franzak, Porter, & Harned, 2019; and Kelly & Pelech, 2019). These understandings about the connected nature of critical rural literacy with place consciousness are essential to the sequence of three inquiry assignments I created to strengthen PSTs’ consciousness of rural places, communities, and issues.

Many pre-service teachers in our program begin their careers in rural districts, but most commute to their schools, often driving over an hour—because they are making a life in an urban locale, not the rural lifeway of the schools where they teach. Some rural students do return to their hometowns, often because of the incentives of “Grow Your Own” initiatives, but as Azano and Stewart (2015) noted, just because someone grew up in a rural community doesn’t mean they know how to teach rural students. Families in rural locales vary in cultures and identities. Azano and Stewart cited Bakhtin’s concept of “entering into dialogue” to describe how PSTs might navigate entering rural communities as teachers. They argue that understanding teaching in rural spaces as a socially mediated act is key to teacher preparation for rural spaces. Because “understanding and response are prerequisite components of meaning making [...] it is vital that pre-service teachers are prepared to attend to the nuances of their own cultural contexts and consider how they might be brought into dialogue with the cultural contexts of the students with whom they will be working” (p. 2). As a former

secondary rural educator, I entered into dialogue with many community members through literacy projects, e.g., nursing home residents, directors, and staff; prominent businesswomen; farmers; and citizen volunteers in non-profit organizations that benefitted the community. Because of my experiences in dialogue with community members, I wanted PSTs to develop those types of dialogues in their future teaching practice.

Tieken (2014, 2017) emphasizes culturally responsive pedagogy is essential because there has been a large increase in the population of Hispanic youth and their families increases in rural spaces. The Hispanic population in the state I teach in (Missouri) grew by 42 percent from 2010 to 2020, and much of this growth is in rural communities within an hour of our campus. Rural pedagogy, then, includes culturally responsive pedagogy and expanded pedagogical and community support for English Language Learners (ELLs). Azano and Stewart argued for a critical place conscious pedagogy that emphasizes pre-service students’ need for understanding their own sense of place. White and Reid (2008) also argued for place-based pedagogies to recruit and retain teachers in rural spaces but acknowledged that teacher education or preparation programs are urban, or metro centered, and it’s difficult to teach and train urban pre-service teachers in a rural school because of work, study, transportation, and family commitments. These researchers agreed upon a need for high quality teachers for children in rural areas and a need for preparing pre-service teachers how to access the funds of knowledge of rural students.

### **Description of Three Assignments**

#### **Deep Mapping our Identities**

In alignment with Azano and Stewart’s (2015) argument that pre-service [and early career] teachers must understand their own sense of place, I began the course by asking students to craft a Deep Map (See Table 1). The deep mapping assignment required teachers to form a dialogue with *themselves*, to make meaning of their own identities. This first local inquiry was an exploration of their sense of place through crafting a deep map followed by writing a legend essay. Brooke and McIntosh (2007) borrow the term “deep map” from William Least Heat Moon’s *PrairyErth*, a mapping of one county in Kansas. Deep mapping has other names, including mental maps, conceptual maps, heart maps, or

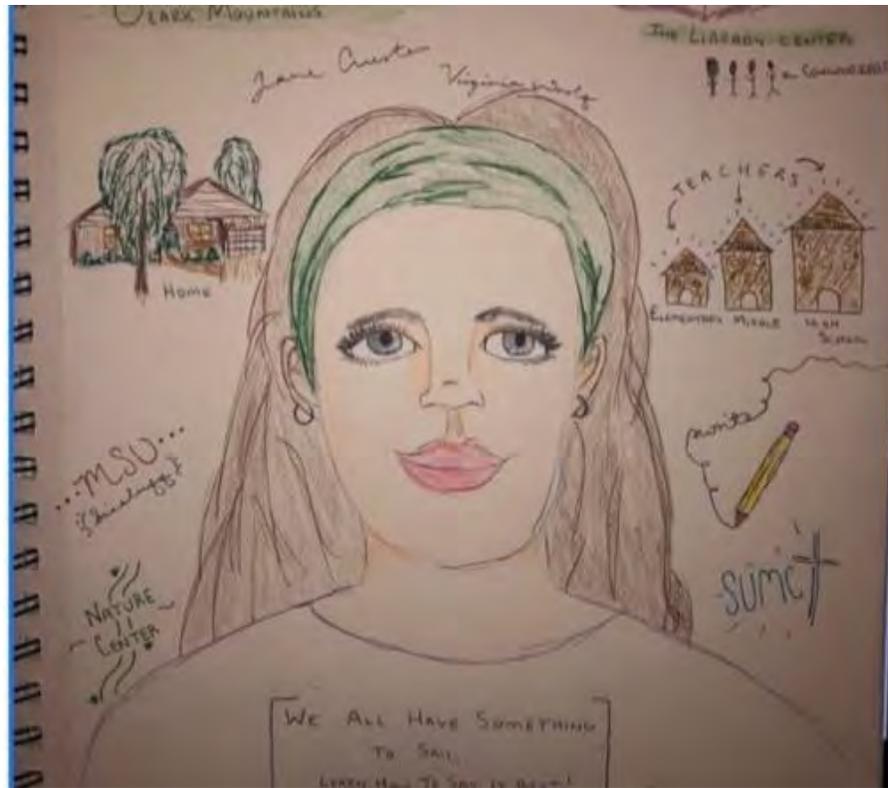


Figure 1 Lauren's Deep Map

bioregional maps, that help us define our relationships to place in varying ways. Deep mapping is explicitly tied to place consciousness:

Writers need to become accustomed to seeing themselves *in a place*, that is, they need to become aware of the various ways location (literal and mental) creates understanding of landscape, culture, class, race, and gender, and surrounds them with local issues and local possibilities...once writers see themselves as located in a place, they can explore their relationship *to a place*...and after exploring their relationships to a place they may go on to write *for their place*. (p. 132)

My hope in assigning this was that as PSTs explored their relationships to a place, they would better understand their responsibilities to the lifeway of the community, and I hoped they would begin to see the connections among various places and identities. In addition to understanding their geographic locale and/or mental space and how it shaped their identities, I'm also interested in students mapping and understanding their identities as teachers of writing, so I included that focus in this initial inquiry. The instructions for the assignment were:

For our deep maps, I want you to draw and analyze a version of your mental maps. We are going to create mental maps of our “teacher of writing” place. For geographers, the mental map is a way of describing how the spaces we inhabit are cognitively ordered through our experiences of those places. Please draw any spaces, ideas, people, concepts or any physical landmarks, buildings, streets, trees, etc. associated with your mental map as a learner and teacher of writing. The deep map is going to be your artifact about your identity as a teacher of writing. We’ll revisit the map at the end of the semester with an opportunity to revise or add to the map.

Once students have drawn their maps, I asked them to write a one to two page “legend” of their map, considering a few questions, e.g. “Is the ‘place’ [space] you currently inhabit concentrated in one part of your community? Or in several spaces in your community? What people or groups of people do you associate with different locales [spaces] on your map? Who does not inhabit your map? What is not on your map? List three “places” [spaces] you would like to know more regarding your teacher of writing identity so that you include them on your map. How would you describe the “place” [space] you are at as

a teacher of writing to others?” These questions are inquiry tools designed to encourage PSTs to examine their own personal connections to places around them with perspectives of inclusion, exclusion, predominant stereotypes, and myths. These questions were designed to give students an eye toward the criticality they would need to examine their future communities and thrive in rural spaces. I also modeled my own teacher of writing deep map, a drawing of myself as a writer, writing on a piece of paper, “I write therefore I am” and my belief grounded in the National Writing Project motto that “the best teachers of writing are writers.” In the background of my map, I drew local places, i.e., the art museum, lakes, campus, local businesses, and tourist attractions as an indication of how place shapes my identity as a writer and teacher of writing. I also shared with them my deep map legend; an essay titled “Write Your World.”

### **Self-selected Local Inquiries**

Once students completed their identity inquiries, I introduced the self-selected local inquiry. This assignment asked them to inquire about their own communities back home, or their new community in this college town, or the campus community. I assigned this inquiry into one’s locale and its societal concerns in order to engage PSTs with one of Hass and Nachtigal’s five senses or “rural lifeways,”—a sense of civic involvement or living well politically—similarly conceptualized within Wattachow and Brown’s six practices of place consciousness as the exploring of the politics of place. I modeled the kind of inquiry and writing students would engage with by conducting my own inquiry project on first-generation student programs. I modeled my own writing process and together, we wrote, revised, revised again, and worked toward a publishable final draft. Students worked in small writing groups to offer feedback based upon the PQP model, “praise, question, polish,” or offered a praise, asked a question or two (or more) and offered advice on polishing the manuscript. Since this project took place in a writing methods course, it built upon an understanding of the recursive nature of writing (Flower & Hays 1981; Hayes & Flower, 1986; Samson, Ortlieb, & Leung 2016).

Students were instructed to craft inquiries through local references, i.e., contacting local experts through email and telephone interviews, personal visits to sites and personal communication with employees, teachers, supervisors, or administrators,

etc. The seventeen students in the course chose varying topics that focused upon educational, cultural, historical, economic, and health needs of our community, areas where critical literacy/social justice issues might be examined within the community. This assignment was designed to get PSTs to learn more about their particular communities to question or debunk stereotypes. I modeled this approach in my own local inquiry into first generation students on our campus and my own experience as a first-generation rural student. Through my own example, I hoped to help students see the importance of dispelling stereotypes and myths about rural deficits in intellect.

### **Proposal to Administrators**

When I introduced the third assignment, a proposal for a community literacy project, I shared with them my own work in a rural district, that included oral histories with nursing home residents (English, 1998), work ethnographies (English, 2015), and a study of poverty and hunger in our local county. The poverty and hunger inquiry arose out of concern from a summer shortage of food for the local food pantry and a need for action to replenish it. The research questions my secondary students and I formulated were, “What is poverty? What is hunger? Why do we have these social issues in a wealthy county?” As I shared this project with PSTs, I made sure to talk about the ways that the rural community I taught in was more complex than the negative narratives of “hicks.” This included pointing out the myths about rural districts to convince preservice and early career in-service teachers not to buy into dominant narratives about rural schools as noted by Eckert and Petrone (2013) and Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen (2021). The rural school where I taught was an affluent community with agricultural wealth, yet there was clearly a financial need for some in the community; I tried to dispel the images and stereotypes of poverty that depict squalor or homelessness. Contrary to the stereotypes about deficits in intelligence, many of my rural students went on to higher education to MIT, Stanford, and Yale. Many also stayed and became local entrepreneurs opening shops on the square, including furniture building, fitness centers, and art studios.

Using the poverty and hunger whole class inquiry project as a guiding example, I displayed artifacts, including the letter addressed to my high school principal, requesting support for the endeavor. This artifact helped shape the understanding that before PSTs initiated a social justice and equity

curriculum befitting the unique contexts of a rural community, they needed to reach out to the administration and community members who could support it educationally and financially. In this assignment, I asked them to consider the following in their proposals:

To enact these projects, I had to approach my high school principal to ask for the resources I needed to make these happen in the classroom. Your assignment is to conceive of a project you might like to do in your future imagined community. (Think about where you want to teach. If it's our present community, think of an issue here you'd like to address with your students). Once you know what you might do, brainstorm a list of resources you will need. Also, think about grants you might apply for that would help defray the cost of the project. If you don't have a grant to support you, please do take the time to estimate how much each item you request may cost. The proposals should include the following items:

1. A detailed description of the project
2. A detailed description of the assessment piece (and accompanying CCSS or state standards that align with the assessment)
3. A proposed budget
4. A description of the outcomes of student learning
5. A detailed rationale of how this benefits your students and community.
6. A list of community partners who have agreed to work with your students

As with the self-selected local inquiries, the seventeen students in the course chose varying topics that focused upon educational, cultural, historical, economic, and health needs of our community.

### **Methodology**

This qualitative study enacted a critical action research methodology (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016) within a bounded system, or a case study of an individual course in one semester. This study investigated a sequence of three inquiry assignments in an advanced methods course in composition theory in the Fall of 2020, during COVID, in an online iteration of the course. Its purpose was to determine if these three inquiry tools can be used to teach a critical literacy that can be applied in rural contexts. This project is an attempt to address calls for teacher educators to build the capacity of PSTs to acknowledge and access the funds of knowledge of rural students by building and supporting their

personal and community inquiry tools. I wanted to determine if by modeling each assignment and my own critical approach to literacy, I could help PSTs develop their inquiry tools as a means of critical literacy.

### **Data Collection**

Data from the Fall 2020 semester was collected for three assignments: A deep mapping of their writing teacher identity, self-selected local inquiries, and a community literacy project proposal to an imagined future principal. For each assignment, I collected artifacts, i.e., for the deep mapping assignment, I collected the drawings or deep map image (s) of their identity in addition to their deep map "legend" essay. For the self-selected local inquiry, I collected drafts of their inquiry essays, i.e., rough drafts, revisions, and final drafts, to examine their critical approach to the inquiry. The community literacy project proposal artifact was a letter composed upon "school stationery" to an imagined future principal, where I examined a problem-based inquiry with future secondary students. I also collected the course final reflections and interview transcripts, both designed to ask about the three assignments and organized to provide opportunities to reflect and name the learning from each assignment. I also continued contact with the five participants after the course ended, through their intermediate methods course, student teaching and graduation, so I could collect the data noted in Figure 1, columns 3 (Student Teaching District) and Column 4 (First Teaching Position). I'm sharing this latter information because it is important to know where these participants came from: the city, the suburb, or the small town. I'll return to it later to investigate the learning from this course and what they enact beyond the reach of this study.

### **Participants**

From a class of seventeen students, I selected four pre-service ELA teachers and one in-service early career teacher who had previously graduated from our program to participate in this study. I conducted interviews with these five students because of their responses in their final reflections, their inquiry assignments displayed an array of effective inquiry skills, including examples of writing to inform, persuade, argue or question, and they agreed to consent to the interviews. I have used pseudonyms for these participants. See Figure 1.

Table 1  
*PST Demographic Information*

Name/Race/Gender	Home Community	Student Teaching District	First Teaching Position
Lauren white female	Community within our city's metro area (Pop. 23,000)	Consolidated school within our city's metro area	Community within our city's metro area <sup>1</sup>
Gianna white female	Suburb of a larger urban city in our state (Pop. 2.8 million)	Suburban school near home city	Small community thirty miles from her home city.
Hailey white female	Suburb of a larger urban city in our state (Pop. 2.4 million)	Small community ten miles from our campus	Suburban school near home city
Trinity white female	Rural community thirty miles from campus (Pop. 11,000)	Chose not to student teach after intermediate methods course	Graduated with an English/literature degree and attained a position as an editor
Regan white female	Suburb of a larger urban city in our state (Pop. 2.8 million)	Student taught and then secured a job in a community within our city's metro area	Recently left that school to become a full-time ELA online instructor in our city's school district.

### Data Analysis

As I analyzed these three assignments of the participants, four key themes emerged that displayed an understanding of the inquiry tools PSTs need to enact a critical literacy, i.e., *self-knowledge*, *multiple expert sources*, *local sources*, and *critical problem-based inquiries*. *Self-knowledge* emerged from the deep mapping of their teacher of writing identity, and all five conveyed a critical understanding of whom they wanted to be in a writing classroom. Through this exploration and dialogue with themselves, they

understood one of Haas and Nachtigal's rural lifeways, a sense of belonging, or living well in community, and in this case, the community of a classroom. Gianna and Regan emphasized student choice in writing, Hailey and Trinity highlighted exploration of students' identity as paramount, and Lauren hoped to first and foremost be an empathic teacher who put students' needs first. Hailey was the only student who used the language of critical literacy, noting a raised hand represented a critical approach in the classroom (see figure 3). All

Table 2  
*Assignment 1: Deep Map*

Student	Excerpt from Deep Map Essay
Lauren	Above my head hangs the word, "empathy." This is what controls all of my actions, perhaps even to a fault. I strive to always approach situations and conversations with the other person in mind <i>first</i>
Gianna	I drew a book titled "My Story." I chose this specific title because as a teacher of writing I want my students to write about topics that involve or mean a lot to them.
Hailey	I used the image of raised hands to represent how I am to approach my classroom from this critical point of view as I expose my students to diverse perspectives to reflect on self-identity, cultural identity, and America's identity.
Trinity	I want to know what makes my students' hearts skip beats and what they hope and dream for the world. I will feel successful as a teacher if my students know themselves better and are stronger writers and thinkers after they leave my class.
Regan	When students write about things they have voice and choice over, that embellishes the richness of the history to come. Writing connects the human experience: no matter where you come from and where you go, writing is the singular communication that sews it all together.

<sup>1</sup> Lauren took a job in a small rural school but then interviewed with the school district where she student taught and broke her contract with the smaller school to take the higher paying position.

participants conveyed an identity as a student-centered teacher of writing. Each wanted their own students to become skilled in critical literacy and have their own writers' voices and a sense of identity. Each focused upon the importance of their students' writing.

The remaining themes of *multiple expert sources*, *local sources*, and *critical problem-based inquiries* were observed in both the self-selected local inquiries and the community literacy project proposal letters to principals. In their local inquiries, Hailey focused upon a campus issue, Lauren, Gianna, and Trinity focused upon issues within our city, and

Table 3  
*Assignment 2: Local Inquiries*

Name	Inquiry Topic /Context	Number of Sources	Excerpt from Local Inquiry
Lauren	Local library's support during pandemic/cultural	Three local news source/three local expert interview	Speaking further with children's librarian, [...] he described one simple method of continuing to offer educational and engaging activities to families. "We have created a weekly 'take-home bag' to let kids have a new craft or activity to work on with their families"... These take-home bags are a prime example of the adaptations the librarians ... have made to accommodate COVID-19 restrictions with meeting the needs of families in the community. Luckily, in [our city] there are many services offered to help the homeless community. One of many is an annual event [that]allows funding of about \$1 million to help the homeless community and is mandated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. This event offers food, important items, health services and other essentials for
Gianna	Homelessness in the city/cultural	Seven local news sources	homeless guests who attend. Not only does this event help homeless people, it helps officials get accurate data on the homeless community. Getting this data is important because it is "essential to help support our goal of making homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring." Young people like myself need to be involved in the governmental process that can invoke change. Register to vote, send letters or emails to your local leaders, and continue to be vocal about the pandemic of systemic racism the nation and [our university] are facing.
Hailey	The university's response to on-campus racism/educational	Six local new sources/one local expert interview	Increased nutritional provision in high-poverty areas would improve neurological development for children who are at the mercy of food insecurity. Kindergarten preparation rates would improve with higher numbers of educational household visits, developmental scaffolding services, and parenting resource access.
Trinity	Resources for K-12 students in poverty/economic	Seven local news sources	It is no different to think that a pandemic would be an effortless switch in the world of teaching. Supporting students in daily endeavors, outside of writing and reading, is what all good teachers enjoy doing, but when confronted with a crisis that reworked the entire system, this is no longer a second nature task. How do teachers keep their heads above water to continue to support students? We have to have better options than mindfulness activities and FAQ resources pages.
Regan	Virtual Learning and mental health support/health	Three local news sources/one local expert interview	

Regan turned her focus upon an issue in her school district (see Table 4). Regarding use of local sources in their inquiries, all five used a minimum of four local sources, with three citing seven sources. Three students utilized local experts, with one student citing three local expert interviews. In the excerpts from each students' essays, I focused upon passages I felt represented what they learned from their inquiries, after engaging with experts and gaining a better understanding of a component of our society and how it functions. This is the kind of critical literacy that promotes living well in what Brooke (2003) calls *intradependence* or fashioning lives that enhance their communities. These inquiries provided students opportunities to enact specific inquiry skills to discover what problems their selected community was facing and examine how institutions or citizens were addressing the issues—or not.

Lauren was employed by the branch of the local library, so she was actively engaged in the processes of social action. Gianna's inquiry into homelessness was centered upon how she might provide critical knowledge to secondary students or their families who were experiencing homelessness. Hailey voiced a call to political action for her university peers; her one interview was with our university's diversity and inclusion director whom she noted gave her the most important insights into what students could do to improve our campus. Through her inquiry, Trinity discovered educational programs and resources for students in poverty and realized the need for proper nutrition for younger students. Regan took action to interview her colleagues to gain a better understanding of what the mental health needs were in her school district. What I noticed about these inquiries is that each conveyed a skill necessary for critical literacy, i.e., the writing conveys an ability to inform, argue, persuade, or question concerning the issue they chose to investigate because they cared about how it affected the community or themselves.

In their community literacy project proposals to their imagined future principals, a *critical problem-based inquiry* was the sole theme observed. Hailey centered upon an historical inquiry of her home city, whereas Trinity centered upon the history of a future community she hoped to reside post-graduation. Regan also chose to focus upon a historical inquiry but framed it in the art literacy of the geographic region of this state. Grace focused upon enacting a community service project and Lauren upon mental health resources for secondary students. At first glance, the inquiry into a locale's history may not qualify as a critical, problem-based inquiry, but in

their proposals, each emphasized the critical skill of using primary sources and hands-on learning through field trips and notetaking (see Table 4). This assignment elicited a critical literacy where "students are supposed to be learning how to participate fully in their local regions" but as Brooke notes, students cannot fully learn rural lifeways and the critical literacy of their place without "classrooms where they have a say in the civic work of education" (p. 13) This assignment also emphasizes Wattoo and Brown's place conscious concept of apprenticing ourselves to places—and student teachers and early career teachers are apprentices—to a mentor teacher but also long-time community members who can teach them about their new locale and its culture, history, spirituality, economics, and economy.

Lauren specifically notes the resources available to her students and has them engaged in the community as social action to provide a shift in perception about mental health. After student teaching, Lauren communicated to me that she was excited to enact the process of local inquiry in her new school. Gianna's civic engagement at the Ronald McDonald house was a hands-on experience where students could develop empathy and compassion but also an opportunity to educate others through advocacy for fund-raising. Hailey's project engaged her students in investigating and understanding the racist history of her city, the red-lining, segregation, and the inequity of school funding and how that past continued to affect her city and the marginalized groups educational experiences. Trinity's project was similar but more closely examined historical events that affected indigenous communities. Regan's critical literacy project asked students to recognize literacy, language, and rhetoric that is conveyed in the region through field trips and observations. She wanted her students to discover their unique linguistic heritage and what it means to be a resident of this locale.

The intent of the self-selected local inquiry and the proposal to an administrator assignments was to increase pre-service and in-service teachers' capacity to consider Bakhtin's "nuances of their own cultural contexts" in juxtaposition with their future students' cultural contexts in the communities they would teach in, and the importance of establishing this kind of dialogue with their students through the act of inquiry. I also wanted students to understand the crucial importance of the varying kinds of literacy opportunities in their imagined future communities where they can engage in what Flower (2008) describes as getting at the "story behind the story."

Table 5

*Assignment 3: Community Literacy Proposals*

Name	Community Literacy Project	Except from Proposal
Lauren	Mental health resources in community	My rationale for this project is that students will be directly engaged with their community. They will be researching not only mental health resources, but specifically those resources available in [our] community. They will be interacting with community organizations through interviews and other research, compiling information from this local inquiry, and raising awareness of these findings in the very community that would be affected. Additionally, with this research students would be working to diminish the stigma against reaching out for help with mental health, both for themselves and the members of their community. By discovering what resources are available and publicly presenting that information, students will be helping to normalize the very idea of these mental health resources and organizations that offer such help.
Gianna	Non-profit volunteer work for students	At Ronald McDonald House, students will cook and serve a meal to the families staying there. Before we volunteer, as a class students will choose what meal they would like to cook and budget to find out how much it would cost. This would allow students to be a part of the planning and budgeting process, teaching them life skills. By cooking a meal together as a class, the hope is to create a “home away from home” experience for the families staying here. After our volunteering experience, students will write in their notebooks their experiences and reflect on their time there. Students will then have time in class to research and find information on the Ronald McDonald House. The goal in researching The Ronald McDonald House is that students will more deeply understand the impact they have made and why this non-profit is important. After researching, students will create a website or pamphlet.
Hailey	History of under- represented people in urban area	This community literacy project benefits the students by involving them with primary source research to gain interview skills and communication, gathering and analyzing data from local history museums and people to create an informative essay, and giving the students a purpose to share their experiences and knowledge on their subject to others through a presentation practicing verbal delivery and incorporating multimedia. The community will benefit from the community literacy project by showcasing the many historical museums students will explore, educating the students about the history of different populations within the community, and how those populations are still affected by that discrimination.
Trinity	History of student’s imagined new community	After students complete this project, they will be able to understand the roots of their community as well as how those roots tie into their own experiences in [our city]. They will be able to investigate the impacts that certain historical events had on the citizens of [our city], Native Americans, and the surrounding counties. More importantly, though, students will be able to develop research and writing skills that will prepare them for the rigorous writing that will be required of them in postsecondary education and in the workforce.
Regan	Investigating historical and art literacy of the region.	After learning about varying types of literacy through in-class activities, small group protocols, and discussions, students will then have an opportunity to act as their own researcher for a specific type of community literacy found here in [our region]. During these scenic and historic trips, students will be actively logging the sights with new questions, ideas, and connections to where we live and how it shapes us. Students will then develop a thorough I-Search paper explaining their research journey: including an in depth discussion of class activities, field trip experience, and their own research about community literacy, along with a visual representation of either: a) a recreation of literacy observed on the field trip, b) an original art piece that reflects our community, or c) a pictorial collage of pieces that spoke to them throughout the duration of the unit.

She sought to document the stories of local everyday citizens to bring an awareness to public servants (people in positions of power) who command the public narrative or create public policy.

### **Implications**

When I return to my research question, “Why do rural teachers uniquely need inquiry tools in order to thrive as teachers in rural spaces?” I consider how rural educators need inquiry tools so they can investigate their communities through a critical lens—confronting the problems or social concerns unique to their small town or rural locale. Each small town has its own history, culture, economy, and ecosystem and each is worthy and in need of critical inquiry. Have I prepared these five participants through participation in these three assignments, to enact these tools in rural spaces? When I consider that of the five participants in the study, only one will begin her teaching career in a rural school, I’m uncertain. When analyzing their self-selected inquiries and their community literacy projects, there is evidence of transference of inquiry skills knowledge, i.e., how to enact classroom inquiries with their future students as co-researchers. Part of identifying the funds of knowledge of rural students is using local experts. This utilization of local experts in their own self-selected inquiries is practice for them to identify and value the funds of knowledge in their communities. These skills can be utilized in any educational setting but are particularly important in rural communities where students’ refrains are often, “There’s nothing to do here. This town is so boring.”

In a recent email concerning her first teaching position in the rural school, Gianna noted, “The principal wore cowboy boots for my interview!” That comment makes me contemplate whether I’ve successfully guided them to examine the deficit-laden stereotypes of rural living, especially since Gianna was raised in the most populous metro area in the state. Trinity was scheduled to student teach in Spring 2022, but in conversations with her after her intermediate methods course that precedes student teaching, she confided, “I’m concerned about taking up a social justice framework in the rural school where I was placed.” Trinity noted she requested the school district where she graduated and noted, “I know this community, and this will be met with contempt.” Trinity conveyed an understanding of a social justice/critical literacy as evidenced in her course work in both the composition course and the

methods course but the recent pushback from conservative, rural spaces focused upon Critical Race Theory (CRT) made her reconsider. Because of her concerns, she didn’t student teach and graduated noncertified with a degree in literature.

In future iterations of the course, I plan to be more explicit in addressing the kinds of unconscious bias about rurality, crafting enactments that specifically require my students to address the stereotypes about rurality, especially for those who won’t teach in rural spaces. As Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen (2021) remind me, “rural deficits [...] if left unexamined, may influence their developing teaching identities [...] and their attitudes toward students and community members in rural communities” (p. 72). They also remind me that it’s important to address these biases because of exploring employment opportunities—beyond the state’s suburbs and cities. I want more of our participants like Gianna, from urban spaces, to consider making a life in a rural school district. The shortage of teachers in our state has the greatest impact upon rural schools. Lauren’s experience mentioned earlier (see Footnote 1) is an example of how rural schools come up short in recruiting and keeping new teachers. It was no surprise to me that she broke her contract to teach in a better-paying, larger school district.

### **Conclusion**

In her final reflection for the course, Hailey emphasized how proud she was of her framing of the community literacy project in her proposal to an imagined principal. The project, “The History of Underrepresented Populations in [City]” investigated the history of many different racial and ethnic groups in her city and how it grew into the diverse population it is today, and how that growth impacted its students and community. She noted that her students in an English III class “would utilize research skills to create a local inquiry surrounding the issues of discrimination and racism within the history of our [city].” Her final reflection shows the beginning of an understanding of inquiry tools:

I want to continue working on creative writing plans that can have my students looking outside the classroom, such as the Community Literacy project. I was always stuck in my English classroom in high school, and so giving my students the ability to research themselves in their own community may provide them with a

type of passion I could never recreate in the classroom.

I also want to continue working on developing writing practices for my future career. Right now, I have a few strategies I can use based on our textbooks and readings; however, I want to expand my knowledge of writing pedagogy so I am well aware of all types of strategies and their best use for different lessons or situations. That is something I will continue to develop throughout my entire career as I learn what my students need, dislike, or as I continue researching strategies.

In her final reflection of the course, Lauren also conveyed a sense of pride in her work, especially her self-selected inquiry into the city library's work with young readers throughout the pandemic. She also conveys an awareness of the importance of enacting inquiries in her future classroom:

Looking back over my work from this semester, I know that the pieces of writing I feel most proud of are the pieces with which I have a personal connection. I think especially of the local inquiry piece, and I remember the passion with which I was able to write it. It was about the [city's] Library District — something I care about, want to know more about, and want to *share* with others. I think that is a critical part of meaningful writing: a desire to *share* that which is being written. This made my writing feel so full of purpose.

With that thought, I am inspired in my mental planning of my future classroom and curriculum. I know that I want to utilize so much of what we wrote in this class with my own future students; I want my students to harness their curiosity, learn about their community, and grow comfortable in sharing their knowledge and

growth with each other. I think community-minded assignments and writing prompts such as we have practiced in this class, with assignments like the previously mentioned local inquiry piece, easily lend to purposeful and practical writing opportunities for students; that is what I experienced with the community-centered pieces I have worked on in this class. I hope to continue that for the students that come through my future classroom.

Although Hailey and Lauren's critical literacy skills will be transferred to suburban schools in metro areas, I have confidence that if either were to relocate into a nearby rural school district, both would enact the same kind of critical literacy that Eckert and Alsup's (2015) wrote about regarding teachers in small rural communities who "are immersed in their students' lives...[and have] deep connections...with students throughout their schooling—connections forged through several levels of classroom instruction, in extracurricular activities, in community organizations and events, and through extensive knowledge of parents and families" (p. 76).

We cannot understand any community without becoming involved in it, knowing its needs—its ecosystem, its cultural and spiritual history, its economic foundation, and its educational needs. For rural communities, this understanding is even more important because of dwindling population and economic need. Some citizens in rural communities have crafted entrepreneurial means to maintain their lifeways. In rural communities, teachers of writing can have a lasting impact upon their communities by piquing the curiosity of their students to know more through local inquiries. Through local inquiries, students discover and understand concerns or problems they must continue to address to sustain their way of life well into the future.

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