Implementing RTI in Two Rural Elementary Schools:

Encouraging Beginnings and Challenges for the Future

Gretchen G. Robinson
University of North Carolina at Pembroke

William D. Bursuck
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Kristin D. Sinclair
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Response to Intervention (RTI) models are currently being implemented in many school districts nationwide. However, at a time when interest in RTI is high, the extent to which it is being implemented effectively in rural schools is largely unknown. Teachers and administrators in two rural elementary schools in the Southeastern United States who were part of a state-wide RTI pilot project participated in this study. Interviews were conducted along with field observations of classroom instruction and team problem-solving meetings. Using a multi-step process for data analysis, various implementation themes emerged related to tiered instruction, data-based decision making, support for model implementation, and collaboration. Findings in these areas support issues raised in the literature regarding factors in rural schools that may impede or enhance fidelity of model implementation. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

Key Words: RTI, rural, team problem-solving, data-based decision making, tiered instruction.

A response to intervention (RTI) approach has been advocated nationally as a means to provide early intervention, prevent academic problems, and identify learning disabilities (LD) (Berkely, Bender, Peaster, & Saunders, 2009; Fuchs, Mock, Morgan & Young, 2003; Fuchs, & Deshler, 2007; Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2009). Research indicates that RTI models have been used in reading (e.g. Fuchs, Fuchs, Compton, Bouton, Caffrey, & Hill, 2007), math (e.g. Fuchs, Fuchs, & Hollenbeck, 2007), and behavior (e.g. Fairbanks, Sugai, Guardino, & Lanthrop, 2007) and are being implemented in different ways in many districts (Division for Learning Disabilities, 2007; Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003). Unfortunately, at a time when interest in RTI is high nationwide, a precise blueprint for implementing it does not exist (Gersten, Compton, Connor, Dimino, Santaro, Linan-Thompson, & Tilly, 2009). The lack of agreement about the procedural steps needed for implementation of RTI has contributed to the uncertainty involved when leaving traditional practices behind without a clear plan for preparing personnel to put a different approach in its place (Werts, Lambert, & Carpenter, 2009; Barnes & Harlacher, 2008; Harmon, Gordanier, & Henry, 2007; Stephens, 1998).

Rural schools may encounter a host of additional challenges when implementing RTI. Schools in rural communities often have a difficult time recruiting highly qualified teachers due to lower salaries and limited social and cultural opportunities available within more remote areas (Bryant, 2010; Lemke, 2010; McClure, 2006; Strange, 2011). While teacher turnover in rural areas tends to be lower, without an influx of newly trained teachers, rural educators may not be familiar with current research and methods (Werts et al., 2009), a matter of particular importance to RTI with its emphasis on the implementation of evidence-based practices with fidelity. Access to effective staff development is therefore particularly essential in rural regions and can be challenging when factoring in travel expenses, sparse resources, and fewer connections to higher education due to remote school locations (Clarke & Wildy, 2011). In addition, it may prove difficult for rural schools to leverage funds and draw a suitable candidate pool for support positions necessary for RTI implementation such as intervention specialists, instructional coaches,
RTI coordinators, school psychologists and speech and language pathologists, (Clark & Wildy, 2011; Stecker, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2008). Last, the decision-making requirements for RTI require effective screening, progress monitoring and other data management tools (Sawchuk, 2011; Stecker, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2008). RTI components that may require considerable district resources and teacher expertise.

Given the potential pitfalls involved in implementing RTI in rural areas, Gersten & Dimino’s (2006) view that “the study of (RTI) implementation is just as important as the study of its outcomes” (p.105) makes considerable sense. The purpose of this exploratory research was to study the experiences of two rural schools in the Southeastern United States during their first year of piloting an RTI problem-solving model. Interviews of project staff along with observations of multi-tiered instruction and team problem solving were conducted to answer the following research questions:

1. What successes and challenges have the rural schools experienced in implementing the problem-solving RTI process?
2. What factors have impeded and/or facilitated successful implementation of a problem-solving RTI model?

Context

Two elementary schools from a rural school district in the Southeastern United States participated in the study. The schools were selected from a list of elementary schools piloting the state’s RTI model provided by the Exceptional Children’s Consultant for the state’s Department of Public Instruction. Because these schools volunteered to be pilot sites, and were about to complete their first year of implementation, it was felt they would provide an excellent lens through which the process of implementing RTI could be viewed and analyzed. Both schools served kindergarten through fifth grade students, a majority of whom were Caucasian.

Based on the state school report card, the percentage of third through fifth grade students in School 1 who passed the reading and math high stakes assessments was 62.1% and 76.4% respectively. The percentage of students from each disaggregated group who passed both the reading and math tests are as follows: White: 62%, Black: 45%, Hispanic: 36.4%, Multiracial: 35.7%, and students with disabilities: 32.1%.

For School 2, 63.2% of third through fifth graders passed the reading test, while 82.8% passed the math test. The percentage of students grouped by ethnicity and disability who passed both the reading and math tests is as follows: White: 71.2%, Black: 36.4%, Hispanic: 53.8%, Multiracial: 71.4%, and students with disabilities: 27.8%.

The schools had adopted the state-approved Problem-Solving Model, an inductive process that evaluates students’ behavior or academic responsiveness in four stages including problem identification, problem analysis, implementation of a plan, and problem evaluation (Burns, Wiley & Viglietta, 2008; Fuchs, et al., 2003). The purpose of this process is to provide a data-based foundation for planning a systematic set of interventions at each of 3 increasingly intensive instructional tiers. Implementation of the problem-solving process was carried out by multidisciplinary teams made up of specialists and teachers trained in the four-stage problem-solving process (Fuchs, Mock Morgan, & Young, 2003; NCDPI, 2008).

Sample and Sample Selection

Participants were selected for interviews using purposive sampling (Patton, 1990); the purpose was to select persons who could provide rich information regarding implementing RTI practices. Participants were selected by the principal at one school and the curriculum facilitator at the other. Participants had little to no knowledge of and no formal training in the RTI process prior to their schools receiving professional development as pilot sites and for their first year of implementation. Those individuals selected for interviews included general education teachers at a range of grade levels who had taken at least three students through the RTI process, as well as special education teachers and administrators who had been actively involved in the first year of implementation of RTI. It was felt that these persons, because of their experience, would be able to attach more meaning to the practices and the process than participants who did not have any experience with the RTI process. In all, a total of seven teachers were interviewed at School 1, and six teachers at School 2. Among the teachers interviewed, all had received formal degrees in education. Years of teaching experience ranged from 1 year to 25 years, with 12.8 years being the average. The principal of school 2 was also interviewed while School 1...
Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and verified against the audiotapes to ensure completeness and accuracy. Interviews were analyzed using a multi-step process (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A set of topical codes was developed by the first and second authors independently based on a reading of a subset of the transcribed interviews. These descriptive codes were created based on broad constructs or topics related to the RTI literature as well as the research questions. Differences in coding categories were discussed and reconciled for each question. The codes were then further manipulated and displayed graphically in matrices, both across and within cases, in order to identify issues or themes within the topical areas identified (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Examples from the field notes and quotes from the interviews were then used to provide more concrete evidence to support the issues and themes identified. To check the findings and interpretations of the results, member checking was completed at the end of the research. Member checking was accomplished by sending both schools a written summary of the findings along with a request for any findings that they deemed inaccurate and/or incomplete. Both schools were in agreement with the findings.

Findings

Four major topics related to RTI implementation emerged from the coding process including issues related to evidence-based instruction, data-based decision making, collaboration, and support for model implementation. These topics encompass issues and themes raised in the literature about RTI implementation (Berkely, Bender, Peaster, & Saunders, 2009; Bursuck et al, 2004; Fuchs & Deshler, 2007; Gersten & Dimino, 2006; Gersten et al, 2009) and that are relevant for implementation in rural schools (Bursuck, Robbins & Lazaroff, 2010). These key topics and related issues and themes are described in more detail in the remainder of the findings section.

Evidence-Based Practices

Decision-making within the RTI framework depends on evidence-based practices being implemented with fidelity within successive tiers (NRCLD, 2006). Of major concern were findings at both schools indicating limited
understanding of what constitutes evidence-based instruction in the academic skill areas, especially written expression and math. This lack of knowledge was evidenced in several ways including the use of practices that were not evidence-based, particularly in Tiers 1 and 2, and the lack of a research-based core reading program. A core reading program is the primary reading program used by a school with the expectation that all teachers will use it to successfully provide a foundation for reading instruction for a majority of the students. Having a core program that is scientifically-based can be helpful for a school just beginning to implement RTI as the content and pedagogy employed provide a good model for teachers and help ensure that instruction is comprehensive and leads to positive student outcomes (Bursuck & Damer, 2011).

Both schools appeared to rely on two sources for selecting materials and instructional strategies: external sources and materials already available in the school. External sources consisted of workshops and consultation with state personnel and university professors. While much of the content of the workshops was evidence-based, and staff perceived this option as helpful, instructional strategies covered in workshops are not likely to generalize to daily practice without a plan for regular follow-up (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, Yoon, 2001). No such plan for follow-up on-site coaching was evident at either school. The second source, materials and strategies already available and used in the past, is obviously cost effective, a concern for rural schools, and a comfortable one as it requires little change in daily routines. Unfortunately, resources available are not always research-based.

**Data-based Decision Making**

A positive finding was that a culture of data-based decision making was beginning to develop in both schools. When asked how data had affected the staff’s Tier 1 instruction, one teacher explained, *It’s looking at students in a different way, looking at data to make your decisions...It’s different than what we’ve ever done before and we’re still learning as a school.* Teachers were using universal screening and progress monitoring data to identify students for support in all 3 tiers. For example, teachers within a number of grade levels were using universal screening data to differentiate instruction in Tier 1 using small flexible groups during what they called “magic time” or “learning zones” where students received extra instruction in areas of difficulty. In this way, students were identified for support earlier, and without the need for labeling. These data were only available for one of the schools but showed fewer referrals to special education. For example, in the year prior to implementation of the RTI model, data showed 17 students were initially referred for special education services while eight students qualified. During the year of our study, only three students were referred and qualified for special education services.

Another challenge in implementing a system of data-based decision-making involved overall implementation of the problem-solving process itself. While both schools made a good faith effort to implement the problem-solving model to make decisions regarding tier placement, the process was time-consuming and inconsistent. One teacher responded, *We spend forty-five minutes and it’s almost not enough time to do that first component of tier 3 paperwork...it’s just a lot of information.* This process can become even more difficult in rural areas as these schools tend to have a high number of students within the lower 20th percentile, which could mean that more intensive instruction is needed for the entire class rather than a targeted group of students (Kashi, 2008). Implementation problems may have been due to lack of familiarity with the workings of the model; indeed, when asked what the problem-solving model was, most teachers rarely referred to the four problem-solving steps. In addition, our observation of a problem-solving team meeting at each school revealed that teachers often failed to come to the meeting with data, rendering decision-making more difficult. This could be due to the fact that the staff was not used to using data. *They’re really not,* one teacher observed. Consequently, an administrator noted, there is insufficient staff with

*enough knowledge of the probes, the curriculum based probes that we’re using to actually help teachers understand what the interventions are looking like, what the probes are telling them relative to intervention and having them understand kids relative to their aim lines and showing progress and where to move them within an intervention structure.*

Finally, there was no attempt on the part of the team leaders to impose time restrictions on the decision-making process.
Despite these problems, when asked about their perspective on using a problem-solving model, most teachers responded positively, indicating that they thought the process had value despite the amount of time and paperwork needed to complete it. One teacher responded, *The problem-solving model has helped make this process much more individualistic rather than kind of cookie cutter.... It’s really helping teachers to aim at where is the problem, and where’s the problem starting.*

Collaboration

The RTI implementation appeared to be leading to increased collaboration, both among general and special education teachers within and across grade levels and among teachers and parents of students struggling to learn. One teacher commented, *I think the collaboration between just teachers, general ed. teachers, special ed. and just everybody on staff as a whole has really made [the RTI process] positive.* Particularly encouraging was that increased collaboration with families was accomplished without the need for referral to special education. A third grade teacher commented,

> The major success is ...to be able to have that conversation with a parent. Oh your child is weak here or your child’s strengths are here. This is where we need to target. And that in itself is just a huge success for us.

Due process rights for parents and students with disabilities have been key components of IDEA from the beginning, largely because historically their due process rights have been violated. One very important potential benefit of RTI is that parental rights are respected more naturally.

While collaborative efforts increased, general and special education teachers agreed that scheduling time for collaboration was challenging. Teachers indicated that there was not enough time in the school day for collaborating with colleagues. A fifth grade teacher commented,

> The drawback ... is having the time to meet to plan flexible grouping and then just to plan what you’re gonna do with those groups. That is a major barrier, in my opinion with RTI, being able to meet and collaborate with each other and figure out what are we gonna do, what are we gonna use, how long are we gonna do this, how are we gonna measure success.

Implementation/Support

A key factor in the adoption of any educational innovation is the extent of teacher “buy in” (Turnbull, 2002). While our sample of teachers interviewed was chosen by the principal in one school and the problem-solving team in the other, a definite limitation, those interviewed were genuinely enthusiastic about implementing the RTI model. One explanation is that in both schools, RTI was being implemented incrementally. In regard to the kind of change involved in moving toward RTI implementation, incremental change is one of the criteria (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Indeed, the teams commented that a step-by-step approach recommended by the state was followed so that staff would not become overwhelmed. In addition, both schools employed models for school change that were a combination of “bottom-up” and “top down” approaches, a recommended way of bringing about school change (Fullan, 2007). Strong support from school leadership led to general support for the project at both schools. Interestingly, each school displayed a very different type of leadership. In one school, the principal played a primary role, leading team meetings and conducting classroom observations, and monitoring the overall implementation. In the other school, which had had turnover in principals, leadership came from the problem-solving team, of which the principal was a member. Evidently, it is the manner of exercising leadership that is important, not whether it comes from a single person or group (Billingsley, 2007; Friend & Cook, 1990). This may be particularly important in rural schools where there may be difficulty attracting administrators with the required expertise and knowledge (Harmon, Gordanier, & Henry, 2007).

It is clear that professional development support from the state was crucial to first year implementation of the pilot projects. Staff and administrators found state-supported workshops in evidence-based reading to be helpful and important. Visits to schools from around the state that were more experienced in RTI implementation were also deemed especially helpful.

Fidelity of implementation addresses whether the RTI model is being carried out as
intended. The establishment of fidelity is crucial both for accurately assessing student needs as well as for providing essential feedback on implementation to teachers. Both schools checked fidelity via required paperwork, yet there were no direct fidelity checks of assessment administration, tier implementation, or whether a clear decision-making model was being followed (Gresham, 1989; NRCLD, 2006). Clearly, such fidelity procedures coupled with on-site professional development are necessary if the model is to be successful in the future. Regarding the whole process, one administrator reflected, *There are some things we have lots of resources and lots of potential, but there [are] some areas that we’re lacking in.* One teacher indicated that two main challenges are the absence of support personnel and hiring issues. *One of the challenges is honestly personnel. It’s personnel and money... We don’t have the classroom teachers... to run [the] whole classroom, tier one, tier two, and a tier three.*

**Discussion**

Based on our findings, providing evidence-based instruction proved challenging. The challenges in providing evidence-based instruction may be exacerbated by the chronic funding shortfalls experienced in rural schools (Jimerson, 2005; Sparks, 2011). A third grade teacher questioned how to use limited resources by stating, *that’s always a challenge… how do you manipulate your resources for the best effect of children?* Funding shortages can also lead to fewer professional development opportunities and limited resources to hire instructional coaches (Harmon, Gordanier, & Henry, 2007). Both teachers and administrators at each school indicated limited access to professional development. When referring to using evidence-based instruction, a principal stated the challenges as, *getting teachers trained, adequately trained and having the resources to purchase what needs to be purchased.* Another teacher stated, *I’m hoping that... we get more staff development on... how to write goals, how to choose goals, and how to make sure your interventions meet your goals.* While universities, state agencies, and resource centers can help meet the distinct needs of rural school districts (Stecker, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2008; Howley & Howley, 2005; Wald & Castleberry, 2000), professional development opportunities through these sources are limited due to location, technology deficits (e.g., outdated programs, bandwidth capacity, security blocks, etc.), compatibility, and technological knowledge. Also, far too many rural school districts face problems in recruiting and retaining highly effective teachers and therefore need to promote high quality professional development to prepare teachers currently in the schools to implement scientifically based strategies. Clearly, rural school systems must become more innovative in developing opportunities for meaningful professional development through online courses and workshops (Beesley, 2011; Stecker, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2008), growing their own trainers and teacher leaders (to support fidelity checks, observations, coaching, and follow-up training), as well as seeking out partnerships with universities to support and implement classroom research-based practices (Alber & Nelson, 2002). This scaffolded level of support will increase the likelihood that information provided during the initial professional development activity will move from theory into classroom practice.

In regard to overall implementation and support, we found that state supported professional development was crucial to first year implementation of the pilot projects. State support may be especially important for rural schools where there are likely to be limited individual school resources available to sustain RTI implementation. The current decrease in state resources allocated to education may make the continued effort to implement RTI in rural schools more difficult. Further, it is often difficult to encourage departments within a rural school system to consolidate federal and local monies to unite towards a common vision or initiative (Sparks, 2011). Consequently, antiquated models of service prevail due to lack of funds and the complexity of the process involved in successful RTI implementation.

Our findings are limited by the fact that we only studied two schools who were voluntarily implementing an RTI model. In addition, the projects were only in their first year of implementation and the teachers interviewed were selected by the school leadership. Interview questions targeted participants’ perceptions of the meaning and purpose of the RTI process but did not specifically address rural issues. Finally, the findings and interpretations of the results are viewed through the lens of the authors who have knowledge and experience with the RTI process. Personal biases may have played a role in their interpretations of the data collected in the study.
Conclusion

Overall, the results are of value for other rural schools that are planning to or are currently implementing an RTI model. We learned that implementation of RTI in rural schools with fidelity and on a sustained basis requires effective, on-going professional development, fiscal and administrative (building, district and state level) support, recruitment and retention of highly qualified personnel, and use of scientifically-based instruction, including the continuous monitoring of student progress to inform instructional decision making. In addition, allocated federal and local funds need to be consolidated to better support RTI initiatives (Sparks, 2011), eliminating the current problem of schools and/or departments within the system operating as separate silos. Building a strong network and support system around RTI schools is also needed in order to deliver innovative instruction to increase student achievement. In our view, RTI can play a key role in creating an integrated system where students who struggle to learn can be supported without necessarily having to receive special education (NASDE/CASE, 2006). Support from general education will be crucial if RTI is to emerge successfully from pilot status to a generally accepted practice.

Lastly, building upon the traditionally stable rural teaching workforce through effective professional development is critical. Teacher leaders need to continue to educate others within the system, while seeking outside training and support to understand current practices and resources available. Building RTI infrastructure in all of the aforementioned areas can be problematic for rural school leaders who will need to adjust and creatively devise realistic long-term plans to overcome these barriers and deliver RTI services effectively and efficiently based on current research.

Findings in the areas of tiered instruction, data-based decision making, support for model implementation, and collaboration provide several avenues for future investigations. The observations of the teachers and administrators interviewed in this study showed that in order for RTI implementation to be successful in rural schools, on-going professional development, fiscal and administrative support, recruitment and retention of highly qualified teachers, technology support and scientifically-based instructional practices need to be established. Future research on RTI practices in rural schools needs to more thoroughly investigate how these variables can be brought to bear in helping rural schools implement RTI with fidelity. For example, what challenges and successes have rural schools with more years of RTI implementation experienced? What challenges have rural schools faced in expanding their RTI models to cover math and writing and what strategies have they used to overcome these challenges? Which aspects of the problem-solving RTI process are most and least helpful? What are ways the problem-solving model can be implemented more efficiently and/or adapted for use in rural schools? What alternative resources can staff in rural schools access to establish core, research-based curricula? What are the differences between rural and urban teachers’ experiences implementing RTI? What are effective leadership strategies for implementing RTI in rural schools?

References


About the authors:

Gretchen G. Robinson, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Special Education in the Department of Educational Specialties at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. Her research interests include Response to Intervention, culturally responsive practices, and early literacy for students at-risk or who have disabilities.

William D. Bursuck, Ph.D., is a Professor of Special Education in the Department of Specialized Education Services at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. His primary research interest is in multi-tier reading instruction for children who are at-risk or have disabilities.

Kristin D. Sinclair, M.A., is a Doctoral Student in the Department of Specialized Education Services at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and is an Instructional Coordinator in the Department of Exceptional Children of the Rowan-Salisbury School System. Her primary research interest is in teacher knowledge and the decision-making process to support students with ADHD.
Using GIS to Teach Place-Based Mathematics in Rural Classrooms

Jacqueline Leonard  
*University of Wyoming*

Nicole M. Russell  
*University of Denver*

Robert M. Hobbs  
*Trenton Central High School, New Jersey*

Heather Buchanan  
*University of Wyoming*

The purpose of this article is to promote the use of GIS and place-based education (PBE) in rural mathematics classrooms. The pedagogy of place is disappearing from rural communities because of declining enrollments, lack of support, and federal mandates to focus more on basic academic skills. However, PBE does not stand in opposition to standards-based instruction and academic achievement; rather, it enhances instructional strategies for getting at these aims. We present examples of place that can be used to engage rural students in meaningful mathematics activities to improve their content knowledge and problem-solving ability. Barriers exist to full implementation of this work. Yet, we offer a vision of what is possible through the use of technological tools like GIS for teachers who teach in rural communities. Additional studies regarding the effect of using GIS are needed to bring the vision of situated place-based education closer to fruition.

**Key Words:** Graphic Information Systems; mathematics education; place-based education; rural schools

Placed-based education (PBE) is experiencing resurgence in U.S. schools as a supplement to traditional instruction (Akom, 2011; Howley, Showalter, Howley, Howley, Klein, & Johnson, 2011). PBE can be traced to Dewey (1912) who contended that the experience students bring from out-of-school settings (i.e., place) should be incorporated into meaningful classroom activities (Long, 2009). The Center for Place-Based Learning and Community Engagement1 purports that PBE “immerses students in local heritage, cultures, landscapes, opportunities, and experiences” that can provide a foundation for learning the core curriculum (i.e., language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science). According to Gruenewald (2003a),

Place matters to educators, students, and citizens in tangible ways that include providing teachers and students with “firsthand experience” to link local contexts to learning environments in order to understand sociopolitical processes and shape what happens in the local community. (p. 620)

Place-based education operates under the assumption that education is not place-less but grounded somewhere in order for learning to take place (Aikenhead, Barton Calabrese, & Chinn, 2006). Place-based learning has roots in the local community—it’s culture, economy, history, and the arts; the community serves as the context for learning, and business and community leaders serve as resources (The Rural School and Community Trust as cited in Shamah & MacTavish, 2009). Thus, place and culture are intertwined such that “to live is to live locally, and to know is first of all to know the places one is in” (Casey, as cited in Gruenewald 2003a).

Through place, students learn about how the world functions and how their lives fit into the spaces they occupy, which can reinforce important motivational ideas such as belonging, reclaiming space, and real-world relevance (Gruenewald, 2003a; hooks, 2009).

**Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to explore ways in which rural teachers can promote place-based

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1 Quote from Center for Place-Based Learning and Community Engagement website: [http://www.promiseofplace.org/what_is_pbe](http://www.promiseofplace.org/what_is_pbe)
education in mathematics classrooms. Place-based education began in rural settings in the 1980s (Howley et al., 2011) and is a natural fit in terms of providing an authentic context for rural students to learn. While critics of PBE contend that this pedagogy takes a great deal of time and planning (Howley et al., 2011), it can be implemented in the mathematics classroom with the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) because it makes place readily accessible.

Rural areas, which tend to suffer from outmigration (i.e., loss of citizens to urban areas) (Holloway, 2002; Howley et al., 2011) could benefit from the use of this technological tool. Teachers can use GIS to engage students in PBE as a means to reduce the undervaluing of place. In this case, authentic learning experiences in mathematics occur as a means to increase appreciation for the uniqueness of the rural community. Thus, teachers can use GIS as an instructional tool to motivate rural students to learn important subject matter within the context of place.

In order to ground our work, we first present a theoretical construct to frame the use of place-based education. Second, we discuss a rationale for using place-based education in the mathematics classrooms. Third, we provide applications of GIS that teachers can use. Fourth, we discuss barriers and possible solutions to using place-based education. Fifth, we discuss the need for additional studies in place-based mathematics education (PBME) that use strategies like GIS to measure the impact of PBME on student outcomes. Finally, we summarize why it is important to use GIS to promote place-based education in today’s classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

While no single theory of place exists, place-based practices can be connected to experiential learning, outdoor education, indigenous education, environmental and ecological education, bioregional education, multicultural education, and other pedagogical approaches that value specific places, locales, and regions where people live and work (Gruenewald, 2003a & 2003b). Underlying many of these approaches is the notion that pedagogical experiences should be connected to students’ lives in meaningful ways (Gay, 2000). Moreover, PBE can be used to help students develop a critical stance to address environmental issues in their communities, thus creating a more democratic and just society (Banks, 2002). Thus, PBE is related to teaching for social justice because it can be used to empower students to engage in critical reflection that leads to action to change the status quo. Gruenewald (2003a & 2003b), who contends PBE is undertheorized, aligned it with critical pedagogy.

Critical pedagogy evolved from critical theory, which was articulated by Paulo Freire (1970/1995) and applied to the field of education (McLaren & Giroux, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1998) to “challenge the assumptions, practices, and outcomes taken for granted in dominant culture and in conventional education” (Gruenewald, 2003b, p. 3). Burbules and Berk (1999) define critical pedagogy as:

An effort to work within educational institutions and other media to raise questions about inequalities of power, about the false myths of opportunity and merit for many students, and about the way belief systems become internalized to the point where individuals and groups abandon the very aspiration to question or change their lot in life. (p. 50)

We use critical pedagogy as a construct for this article. However, like other critical pedagogies, many teachers are at a loss regarding how to implement place-based pedagogy in everyday classrooms, especially in mathematics classrooms. In this paper, we provide teachers with rich examples to build a foundation to teach place-based mathematics education.

Why Place-Based Mathematics Education?

Empirical studies that examine place-based mathematics instruction in U.S. schools are sparse (Howley et al., 2011). While the evidence on the benefits of using PBME is thin, brain-based researchers (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000) contend that students’ emotions have an impact on learning. Researchers (Bransford et al., 2000) suggest that making connections to the real world positively influences students’ emotions, which in turn influences their engagement. Positive mathematics identities and empowerment result from engagement in lessons that are linked to place (Gruenewald, 2003a; Tate, 2008). PBME has the capacity to engage students emotionally and increase student engagement, which potentially then impacts student retention and academic performance.

Mathematics problems specific to rural regions of the U.S. can be used for context. Events such as community festivals in Appalachia can be used in everyday mathematics classrooms. Production of beverages at plants like Mountain Dew in Tennessee, Coca-Cola in Georgia, and Pepsi in Wyoming may be collected and compared in terms of market share, production costs, and profit margins. Students could also debate the nutritional value versus the caloric consumption of such products in terms of cost-benefit. Mineral and water rights as well as other...
issues of environmental and ecological concern can also serve as the context for learning and doing mathematics in rural spaces. Not only are such activities connected to the real world, but they are also connected the neighborhoods and communities where students live. Thus, students have the opportunity to learn rigorous mathematics content knowledge within a place-based context while simultaneously learning about issues of importance to the economy, health, and wellbeing of rural citizens.

**Graphic Information Systems Applications**

PBME can further facilitate enjoyment and learning if it is connected to technologies like Graphic Information Systems (GIS). GIS is defined as “an interactive mapping and analysis tool [that] allows multiple layers of information about a given place to be represented simultaneously, thus exposing the interactions among layers and...[the] conception of neighborhood to be represented in greater complexity” (Talen & Shah 2007, p. 583). GIS has been used in classrooms for more than 30 years, becoming part of geography courses in higher education as early as the 1980s (Elwood, 2009). Teachers can use web-based programs like Google Earth and Google Maps to engage students in spatial technologies and PBE (Hogrebe & Tate, 2012; Leonard, Brooks, Barnes-Johnson, & Berry, 2010). While GIS projects have been shown to inform urban communities about civic planning and action, (Elwood, 2009; Talen & Shah, 2007), few have used GIS to empower rural communities. GIS projects not only provide opportunities that focus “on place and space as important contextual variables” (Hogrebe & Tate, 2012), they can also be used to evaluate the boundaries of farms, parks, residential and commercial areas, activity patterns, and community preferences regarding places (Brantlinger, 2005; Gruenewald, 2003a; Hogrebe & Tate, 2012; Tate, 2008). For example, Brantlinger (2005) used a map of his students’ community to help them discover its assets (e.g., parks and recreation centers). Students learned concepts such as radius, circumference, and diameter as they examined the assets that were within a 3-mile radius of their neighborhood. Google Maps can be used in rural classrooms to accomplish the same academic goals.

We discuss two examples used by classroom teachers in small towns and then provide several other examples that can be used by teachers in small towns and rural areas throughout the U.S. The first example is the use of a Google Maps project in New Jersey. The second example uses GIS to locate a pumpkin farm in western Wyoming.

**The Google Maps Project**

In Trenton, New Jersey, a high school mathematics teacher explained how he used GIS to help his students learn how to find and calculate slope. His reflections and the essence of his lesson plan are presented below:

*The Google Maps Classroom Project actually began when I introduced ninth-grade Algebra I students to a lesson on how to find the slope of a line given two sets of points. After students were familiar with this concept, they were prepared to put what they had learned into practice. Each student was given a sheet of graph paper and asked to superimpose an x- and y-axis through the center and label the origin. We then proceeded to the lab where all students were instructed to go to Google Maps and locate our school. The school was the origin for the map. Students then located their homes on the map and were asked to place the origin (center) of the graph paper directly on the computer monitor where the school was to make sure that the x- and y-axes were properly lined up. Students were asked to place a point on their homes and labeled that point with the letter H. After the students labeled the point where their homes were, I instructed them to place the scale (from Google Maps) that was associated with the distance between their home and the school at the bottom of their graph sheets (1inch = 2,000 ft., 1 inch = 1,000 ft., etc.). I informed them that the scale at the bottom of their papers would be the same scale that they would use when locating other places on their maps. I then asked students to locate the nearest CVS and Rite-Aid pharmacies, Save-A-Lot and ShopRite grocery stores, the closest corner stores and farmer’s market. I instructed students that each time they located an object on the graph to use the school as their origin and to make sure the graph paper was always facing north or in the positive y direction. In addition to this, the scales that they used had to always match up with the scales at the bottom of their graph paper before
they actually labeled them. Finding directions to different places that have different distances from the origin often result in the scales changing. For this project to work successfully, students had to establish a common scale.

A week or so later the students were asked to mark the intervals on their graphs based on the scales at the bottom of their papers. When this was completed the students began to assign coordinates to the points they labeled the week before. Ultimately, students found the slope of the line between the school, their homes, and several other points. Students determined the slope of these lines by using the coordinates of the two points \( \text{slope} = \frac{y_2-y_1}{x_2-x_1} \) or by simply counting the grid lines \( \frac{\text{rise}}{\text{run}} = \frac{\text{change in y}}{\text{change in x}} \) (see Figure 1 below).

![Figure 1. Student work sample](image)

The Google Maps project reveals how students experienced a great deal of success solving complex math problems by relating the problem to the place. Learning the concept of slope is not trivial. One of the more difficult questions on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP, 2011) was as follows: Which of the following is an equation of a line that passes through the point \((0, 5)\) and has a negative slope? In the Google Maps Project example, students had to calculate both positive and negative slopes. Positive slopes tilt toward the right on a map, and negative slopes tilt toward the left. Students are more likely to remember these subtleties when they are anchored to their own neighborhoods.
After finding the slope, students can easily write an equation for the line by using the point-slope formula: \( y = mx + b \).

**GIS and the Pumpkin Patch**

In addition to using GIS to find distances and slopes, the terrain feature can be used to identify how land is being used. For example, in Wyoming there are many open spaces and mountain ranges. However, farms can be easily identified in an aerial view using Google Maps. A second teacher in a rural town described how her students used placed-based mathematics education:

I have personally experienced how most students were motivated to learn more about their world and the excitement that teachers have when they see their students learning on a whole new level. Spending a long week with students near Jackson Hole, Wyoming, they physically experienced various landscapes, weather, wildlife, and vegetation. They learned leadership skills, how to read a map, and survive in their land. Students also gathered random samples on a second trip to a local pumpkin farm in Riverton, Wyoming, and used the data to analyze the pumpkin’s weight, circumference, density, and volume. All of the students used Excel to calculate measures of central tendency, random sampling, correlation, and finding an equation for the “line of best fit”. This activity was a challenge for my lower skilled math students, but relatively simple for the upper grades (Algebra II & Geometry). I had to keep the activity simple because of the small number [of students] in the school, time constraints, and [personal limitations] to help those students with lower math skills. Typically, our more advanced students became more involved while I had to encourage our lower skilled students to “do their own work.”

While the experiences the students had were positive, this teacher’s reflection brings up the issue of small group learning. Individual student work, which is typically found in traditional mathematics classroom settings, should not apply in PBME. Students should be able to learn procedural knowledge from each other in small groups, allowing stronger students to help weaker ones (Leonard, 2001). In this way, all students benefit because stronger students learn to articulate their thoughts to others as a peer coach and weaker students benefit from one-on-one instruction. The teacher could then spend more time working with groups who need her help.

Furthermore, this teacher’s experience conflicts with the findings of Howley et al. (2011) that teachers of more advanced students are less likely to engage them in PBME. Howley et al. (2011) found that students in vocational education tracks are more likely to experience PBME in the mathematics classroom. Given the wide range of abilities in this teacher’s classroom, her experience reveals that students of all achievement levels can benefit from PBME. Albeit, thoughtful organization of small groups during all aspects of the activities, including procedural knowledge, would appear to enhance low-achieving students’ opportunities to learn.

**Additional Opportunities for PBME in Wyoming**

Many more examples of place can be used to engage rural students in meaningful mathematics activities to improve their mathematics content knowledge and problem-solving ability. Here we provide a few examples of such opportunities for rural students in Wyoming.

**GIS and Saratoga.** The landscape and resources of the Saratoga area in Wyoming provide an interesting example of place. The natural hot springs of Saratoga are a popular tourist attraction. Connecting mathematics to place, students could use the high school in Saratoga as the point or origin to determine the distance from the school to the springs and the slope line from the school to the springs or the airfield.

In addition to calculating the distances, slopes, and the equations of the lines, the grounds of the Saratoga Resort have smaller springs that are covered by tipis (See Figure 2). Students could estimate the amount of material needed to make one of the tipis as well as determine the surface area of a tipi using the formula to find the surface area of a cone.

![Figure 2. Tipi at Saratoga Resort](image)
Frontier Days. Another place-based activity that provides context for rural students is Frontier Days, which takes place annually in Cheyenne, Wyoming, during the month of July. People from all over the United States travel to see the rodeo and participate in the festivities. Frontier Days provides students with the opportunity to make predictions related to probability, for example: How long can a cowboy ride a Bronco. Problems that deal with purchasing western wear and consuming food could also be created. Projections and calculations of revenue for a given year and for future years could also serve as mathematics investigations.

The Snowy Range. The Snowy Range is also a place with which students in Wyoming can identify. Skiing lessons can be taken and lift tickets purchased. A myriad of mathematical problems could be developed around the ski season and this sport. Even though students may not be able to afford to go skiing, they can identify with snow and snowboarding activities. Word problems that incorporate weather in terms of snowfall, average temperature, and wind speed can also be used to engage in rigorous mathematics. Students can record data and graph stem-and-leaf plots based on the data.

State resources. Wyoming resources can also be used as a context for engaging in place-based mathematics. The railroad is a viable part of the Wyoming economy. Moreover, Wyoming is the primary producer of coal in the United States, supplying coal to more than 27 states and more than 130 power plants nationwide. About 80% of the cost of coal is associated with its transportation. Algebra problems involving the movement of trains carrying coal in and out of Wyoming could be used as the context to explore linear equations. Rather than solving an arbitrary problem of two trains traveling at different speeds to determine when they meet, the coal trains could be used for context. Mathematics problems exploring the number of tons of coal needed to produce electricity for communities in Wyoming could also be incorporated.

Overcoming Barriers to Place-Based Education

The places where children reside create both opportunities and challenges when it comes to learning outcomes and educational attainment (Aikenhead et al., 2006; Leonard, Napp, & Adeleke, 2009; Morris & Monroe, 2009; Tate, 2008). Challenges include the fact that PBE is disappearing from rural communities because of declining enrollments, lack of support, and federal mandates for accountability that have led to a greater focus on basic academic skills in many rural schools (Howley et al., 2011; Shamah & MacTavish, 2009). While little can be done about declining enrollments, per se, teachers can address outmigration by using place to highlight the cultural capital of the local community. One way that cultural capital can be understood is through exploring the resources within a community that can be used and appropriated for economic development or educational ends (Beadie, 2008). The Wyoming Rural Development Council (WRDC) is an example of how rural communities are engaging in the ideas of community partnership. Their mission is to enhance collaborations that strengthen the viability of rural Wyoming. An important goal of this organization is to promote (through education) an understanding of the needs, values, and most importantly the contributions of rural communities. Thus, teachers have a rich opportunity to address outmigration and emphasize the cultural capital of the local communities in which students live.

Lack of support can be addressed in two ways. First, principals and other administrators must buy in and support teachers’ efforts to teach from a place-based perspective (Gruenewald, 2003a; Howley et al., 2011). In addition, principals should support teachers rather that penalize them for diverging from the traditional curriculum. Moreover, schools may not have funding for extensive professional development on best practices in terms of using PBME. Thus, articles like this one provide teachers with an important resource. Another way to support teachers’ work in place-based education is with materials and supplies. While many school districts are still feeling the crunch of the 2008 economic downturn, grants are available to supply teachers with materials and supplies to conduct projects with their students through organizations like the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and the Junior League (Leonard, 2004).

In terms of accountability, GIS and place-based mathematics education (PBME) can be used to teach important mathematics content and to engage rural students at higher levels. PBE does not stand in opposition to standards-based instruction and academic achievement. Rather than replacing the traditional curriculum, PBME can be used to supplement it, introducing the mathematics concepts and helping students to recognize and use mathematics for a purpose (Long, 2009). This technique of introducing the lesson with PBME can be used in both elementary and secondary classrooms with students of various achievement backgrounds without sacrificing mathematics content.
Need for Research

While several of the examples provided in this article have not been field-tested or observed in rural K-12 classrooms, we believe students in rural schools would be motivated to engage in problems that deal with familiar places rather than focus only on textbook problems. However, studies of PBME in rural spaces are needed to validate our assumptions. Clearly, there is a need for additional studies that examine PBME.

We know that GIS is a valuable way to teach mathematics concepts and skills, particularly many of the skills emphasized by NCTM (2000) like representing numbers visually, understanding patterns and relationships, and using geometric and spatial relationships. However, there is still a lot to learn and understand about how using this tool influences students’ performance on accountability measures at state and national levels. PBME may not be appropriate to teach every mathematics topic. However, brain-based research is expanding, particularly in science and mathematics (Bransford et al., 2000). Conducting brain-based research to determine which PBME activities students find more enjoyable would be a tremendous scientific breakthrough. Additional studies are needed to show how students’ emotions are effected by critical pedagogies like PBME. Such studies may provide evidence to support PMBE as a best practice in rural contexts.

Summary

In an era of high accountability, K-12 teachers in U.S. schools are often conflicted when it comes to making decisions about how to teach mathematics. However, we have shown that GIS is readily accessible and just a click or two away. All students need to do is click on Google Maps, insert the school address, then click on find nearby and enter the name of a business or community asset on the computer. Use of GIS in the mathematics classroom provides rural students with authentic learning opportunities that bring the vision of situated place-based education and quality mathematics instruction for all students closer to fruition. The array of mathematics that can be done using GIS and place-based learning is numerous. From algebra (determining slopes and linear equations), to geometry (finding radius, perimeter, area), and from data analysis (graphs and interpretation of data) to locating a pumpkin farm, the range of mathematics activities is only limited by teachers’ and students’ imaginations.

Teachers have very little control over federal and state policies when it comes to accountability. In the era of No Child Left Behind (2001), teachers and schools are under tremendous pressure to show higher gains on standardized tests. However, if student achievement in a particular school has plateaued (i.e., reached ceiling effect), something different has to be done to bring about change. Place-based education may be the change that can motivate students of all achievement levels to engage and succeed in mathematics. Administrators and teachers must be willing to take risks in order to increase achievement, especially in rural schools where focusing solely on basic skills has not produced the desired results.

References


About the authors:

Jacqueline Leonard is the Director of the Mathematics and Science Teaching Center at the University of Wyoming.

Nicole M. Russell is an assistant professor of teacher education at the University of Denver.

Robert Hobbs is a mathematics teacher at Trenton Central High School in Trenton, New Jersey.

Heather Buchanan is a former teacher and student in the Middle Level Mathematics Masters’ Degree program at the University of Wyoming.
Involving the Parents of English Language Learners in a Rural Area:
Focus on the Dynamics of Teacher-Parent Interactions

Jenna M. Shim  
*University of Wyoming*

*In this study, the author suggests that the current ELL parental involvement model often overlooks the structural aspects and power asymmetry of parent-teacher relationships that can hinder productive collaboration. In doing so, the author uses postcolonial theory as a conceptual lens to investigate the dynamics of ELL parent-teacher interactions from rural ELL parent perspectives by looking at those interactions as intercultural relations. The study uses a general qualitative methodology to explore the dynamics of ELL parent-teacher interactions. Three broad themes that emerged as obstacles that inhibit productive ELL parent-teacher interactions were (1) teachers’ judgments toward ELL students and their parents, (2) ELL parents’ frustration about their inability to influence a teacher’s decision making, and (3) ELL parents’ fear of repercussions for speaking up. The paper concludes with important implications for teachers working with ELL students in rural areas.*

**Key words:** ELL parent involvement, ELL learning, ELLs in a rural area, ELL parent-teacher interactions

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English language learners (ELLs) is the fastest growing population among the school-age group in the nation (Kanno & Cromley, 2013). Over the past 15 years, the number of English language learners has nearly doubled to about 5.5 million, and by 2025, it is predicted nearly one in every four public school students will be an ELL (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, NCELA, 2007; Winke, 2011). This growing wave of linguistic diversity is not limited to large metropolitan areas. In fact, growth has been much more rapid in less populated rural states. In this regard, O’Neal, Ringley, and Rodriguez (2008) reported that “ELL students and their families tend to settle in geographical locations that are rural” (p. 6). Similarly, Reed (2010) stated that rural areas are experiencing a rapid increase in racial and ethnic diversity in their student populations; therefore, schools in rural states are facing unique educational challenges in meeting the needs of diverse student populations, including ELLs, a group with which teachers feel inadequately prepared to work productively. With respect to ELL students’ academic achievement levels, many states reported that dropout rates for ELLs are significantly higher than dropout rates for non-ELL students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2011). In some rural states, dropout rates have increased and graduation decreased within last five years mainly because of the educational and social challenges that ELLs face in their lives (Walker, 2012).

Research in the field of education is constantly striving to improve student learning, and the importance of parental involvement in student success at school now seems obvious. Indeed, parental involvement as an effective factor in improving student learning is no longer a subject of debate (Wei & Zhou, 2012), and a positive correlation between the ELL parental involvement and ELL student learning has been firmly established (Panferov, 2010). Meanwhile, just as is the case for non-ELL students, in particular those from low income families, difficulties associated with involving the parents of ELLs in their children’s schools continue to be reported (e.g., Henderson, Jacob, Kernan-Schloss, & Raimondo, 2004; Hiatt-Michale, 2001; Panferov, 2010). Barriers that may prevent involvement of parents of ELLs have been identified as “language, cultural differences, work schedules, and lack of transportation” (Padgett, 2006, p. 44). With respect to parental involvement in general, Cox (2005), in her meta-analysis of 18 empirical studies, not only confirmed the correlations between parental involvement and students’ academic achievements, but she also concluded that the most effective aspect of parental involvement efforts lies in the interactions between parents and teachers. Indeed, Padgett (2006) stated that parental involvement in school activities alone will not increase student achievement; rather, it is the quality of interactions and communication between teachers and parents that has a significant impact on student achievement.

Parental involvement in their children’s education can take many different forms (Heymann & Earle, 2000), such as volunteering at school,
assisting their children with homework, and becoming involved in school governance issues. However, since prior research has established that high quality interactions between parents and teachers are the most effective aspect of parental involvement effort, and, because exploration of ELL parental involvement is limited, the focus of this study is to investigate the dynamics of ELL parent-teacher interactions from the perspectives of the ELL parents. The research question that guided this study was: What are the factors that influence ELL parent-teacher relationship and interactions from ELL parents’ perspective?

The importance of this study lies in several areas: rapid growth in linguistically diverse students in rural areas is now a mainstream issue and yet many rural teachers feel unprepared to work productively with ELL students and their families; the investigation of ELL parent-teacher relationships and the tensions within them remain an understudied area in the literature; and the perspectives of ELL parents do matter if we are serious about recognizing the contributions that ELL parents can make to the children’s success in school. Lastly, this study, which takes place in a small town in the Western state, is important because the National Center for Educational Statistics showed that the ELL population in the Western states has more than doubled in the decade between 1995-2005 (NCES, 2006). The conceptual framework that follows briefly discusses Edward Said’s (2003/1979) postcolonial theory and how it is employed as a guiding lens for this study.

**Conceptual Framework**

Despite the great influence and potentially positive impact of parental involvement and parent-teacher collaboration, parent-teacher relationships in general remain an area of tension (e.g., Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003), including ELL parent-teacher relationships (e.g., Henderson et al., 2004; Hiatt-Michale, 2001; Panferov, 2010). Indeed, Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) stated that the borderlands between families and schools are a “most complex and tender geography” (p. xi). In investigating the dynamics of ELL parent-teacher interactions as intercultural relations, Edward Said’s (2003/1979) postcolonial theory is instructive because he explored how different cultures are represented especially by people who occupy a more dominant position. Put differently, Said was particularly committed to equal human rights, and given that the broader goal of this study is to increase more equitable educational opportunities for ELLs by exploring the dynamics of ELL parent-teacher interactions in which parents and teachers occupy different cultural and power positions, Said’s postcolonial theory provides a robust conceptual framework upon which to ground this study.

In his most famous work, *Orientalism*, Said (2003/1979) foregrounds the social fact that neither individuals, nor social groups, nor cultures ever develop or exist on a *level playing field* (an equal power level), because individuals, social groups, and cultures are always constituted in and through discursive and material practices that are invisibly constituted by complex sets of asymmetrical power relations. Along these lines, Jandt and Tanno (2001) argue that the framework for postcolonialism can be used to expose not only colonial imperialism but also discursive and material practices that are invisibly constituted by also *perceptual imperialism* in the present age. By perceptual imperialism, Jandt and Tanno mean “the process of observing and interpreting information about cultural Others through an underlying set of ideas based not so much on reality as on myth” (p. 120). Thus, the unequal power relations that constitute representational and differentiating practices in intercultural relations can be understood via the framework of postcolonial theory. In relevance to this study, ELL parent-teacher relationships are considered as intercultural relations because linguistic difference overlaps with cultural difference. Furthermore, ELL parent-teacher relationships are grounded in unequal power relations not only because of the different power positions that teachers and parents (like doctors and patients) occupy historically but also because of the different power positions that teachers, the majority of whom are European Americans and parents as racially and linguistically marginalized groups occupy historically (Luke, 2004).

From a postcolonial theoretical viewpoint, no discourse of knowledge, self, other or cultural relations and interactions is ever neutral (Said, 1994) and how problems of difference are understood depends on the political locations in which individuals stand. What this means for ELL parent-teacher interactions is that how teachers understand the cultural practices of ELL families, for instance, is never objective; rather, teachers’ perceptions are influenced by their cultural, social, and political backgrounds. In this regard, intercultural relations are invisibly linked to discourses of unequal power relations between the members of the dominant and subordinated groups because the members of subordinated groups are represented by the members of the dominant group in ways that often serve the dominant group’s interests – i.e., most often an unintentional act on the part of the members of the dominant group. Hence, when viewed through the
lens of postcolonial theory, ELL parent-teacher interactions are not just individual-to-individual relationships and relationships in which knowledge and opinion matters in their interactions are linked to the power relations that are historically constituted and thus not always visible. In other words, ELL parent-teacher interactions can be constituted by the usually unconscious enactment of power of the teacher. In this regard, this study, which explores the dynamics in ELL parent-teacher interactions in a rural area from ELL parents’ perspectives, postcolonial theory helps us understand the subject position of the ELL parents and why ELL parents feel the way they feel.

To further ground the study, the literature review explores the benefits of parental involvement and the factors inhibiting ELL parental involvement. Although this study investigates the dynamics of ELL parent-teacher interactions in a rural area, because current research on ELL parental involvement has been limited, parental involvement in children’s schooling in general is reviewed.

**Benefits of Parental Involvement**

Parental involvement in its broad term has been defined as “the willingness of parents to participate in the education of their children” (Jeynes, 2003, p. 204), and it has become “one of the centerpieces of educational dialogue among educators, parents, and political leaders” (Jeynes, 2003, p. 203) for quite some time already. In this regard, numerous studies have shown that parental involvement has a significant influence children’s success at school (Heymann & Earle, 2000; Panferov, 2010; Walker, 2012; Wei & Zhou, 2012). With respect to rural areas, King (2012) reported that parental involvement serves as one of the factors that most impacts rural students’ decisions to attend college. This finding is not surprising given that students become motivated when they observe their parents take an active interest in school because parent involvement communicates to students how important they are to their parents (Gonzales-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005). Other researchers have shown that the parents who emphasize their children’s achievement as important and who are actively involved in their learning significantly impact student motivation (Marchant, Paulson, & Rothlisberg, 2001). Some studies have shown that parental involvement is also positively related to students’ attitudes toward school and to reduced high school dropout rates (Rumberger et al., 1990; Jeynes, 2003). Others have even reported that parental involvement impacts time students spend on home work (e.g., Trusty, 1996; Gonzales-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005).

These studies have looked at parental involvement as parent-teacher collaborative tasks and relationships, which make a perfect sense given that parents and teachers, have the mutual goal of children’s success in school. With respect to ELL students, researchers have similarly shown that parental involvement has a positive effect on their second language learning, student motivations, and academic achievement (e.g., Kanno & Cromley, 2013; Walker, 2012; Wei & Zhou, 2012).

Many researchers have also argued that encouraging ELL parental involvement can be difficult (Kozol, 1991; Mace-Matluck, Alexander-Kasparik, & Qeen, 1998; Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008). Some studies have identified factors limiting ELL parents’ school involvement as a mismatch between the parents’ own experiences with, and expectations for school, as well as their English proficiency (Bosher, 1998; Hyslop, 2000; Jeynes, 2003; Muchinsky & Tangren, 1999). Others have identified obstacles as the lack of effective communication venues between parents and the teachers (Padgett, 2006; Scribner, Young & Pedroza, 1999); the low level of support and training provided by the school to encourage greater parent engagement (Gibson, 2002); and the lack of time and resources to take time off from work (Heymann & Early, 2000). Also, Smith, Astern, and Shatrova (2008) have identified the factors inhibiting Hispanic parental involvement in their children’s school as “the failure of the school to send correspondence, school calendar, lunch menus or newsletters written in Spanish; and the inability of the parents to speak and advocate for the right of their children” (p. 18).

Through a brief literature review on the different aspects and effects of parental involvement, what is notable is that many studies assume that parent-teacher collaboration occurs on an equal power level. So for instance, if English proficiency issues were solved, if schools provided more training and opportunities to support parental engagement, and if the time constraint from parents’ work was taken into an account more seriously, then productive and active parental involvement and successful teacher-parent relationships are attainable. In other words, the current parental involvement model often does not attend to the structural aspects and power asymmetry of parent-teacher relationships that can hinder productive collaboration. That said, the dynamics of ELL parent-teacher interactions in rural areas merit further research because (a) parent-teacher interactions hold great potential to improve student achievement (Cox, 2005), (b) the ELs overall in the nations are underperforming academically when
compared to their counterparts (Winke, 2011), (c) ELL parent involvement continues to be difficult (Kozol, 1991; Mace-Matluck, Alexander-Kasparik, & Qeen, 1998; Panferov, 2010), and (d) the rapid growth of ELLs in rural areas brings unique challenges to the schools in meeting their academic needs.

Methods

The study uses a general qualitative methodology to explore the dynamics of ELL parent-teacher interactions.

Setting

The context of this study is a town located in the south-central portion of a Western state in the U.S. The state is made up of primarily rural ranching communities, and the town has a population of 9300. Due to many employment opportunities linked to the state penitentiary and coal mines in the town, in the last two decades the town’s mainly white population has become increasingly diverse, with the greatest increase in the Latino population, but also including individuals from China, Thailand, and Philippines. Consequently, the influx of ELLs has been noticeable in the town, and the public school ELL population in the town has more than doubled since 1990’s.

The town houses two elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. Currently, 26.6% of the total student population is Hispanic, and Asians and Native Americans account for 4.1%. With regard to English as Second Language (ESL) services, 11.8% of the total student population qualifies and over 15% of the total student population lives in a home where one or both parents speak a language other than English.

Participants

Participants were recruited from middle school parents. The total student population of the middle school is 385, and according to an administrator of the school district, about 20% of the middle school population is ELL students. Initially, a district ESL program coordinator assisted the researcher in identifying and contacting the participants in person and by telephone calls. Six ELL parents whose children were enrolled in the middle school responded to the coordinator’s invitation and volunteered to participate in this research project. Of the six parents, four parents spoke Spanish as their first language and two parents spoke Chinese as their first language. The number of years that the participating parents and their families lived in the town is between 3 to 10 years. Three of the Spanish speaking parents did not feel comfortable interacting in English with the researcher; for these three, a high school ESL teacher in the same school district who speaks Spanish as a second language fluently served as a translator. The other three parents spoke English to communicate with the researcher. One Spanish-speaking parent and one Chinese-speaking parent were fathers of their children, and the other parents were mothers of their children.

Procedures

The researcher and the six volunteer ELL parents met initially at an ELL parent night at the middle school. The middle school holds a parent night for ELL parents twice during a school year, and according to the district ESL coordinator, the attendance rate remains low. During the ELL parent night, the researcher and the ELL parents talked casually in a group but also on a one-to-one basis. Each individual conversation lasted about 15 minutes, and they all agreed to participate in future individual interviews. Following the ELL parent night, the researcher contacted each ELL parent and met with them individually for about an hour. All the interviews were tape-recorded, and as mentioned above, the translations for the three ELL parent interviews were provided by a high school ESL teacher. The main question that guided the interviews was: How do you feel about interacting with your child’s teachers?

Data Analysis

Open coding strategy of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to identify and analyze the patterns and themes within the participants.

Findings and Discussion

While the details of each ELL parent’s interactions with their children’s teachers were not identical, there were many similar dynamics that were found to be important. The discussions in this study pertain to the experiences of the participants in this study; thus, they cannot be generalized. In addition, this study does not deny the importance of the perspectives of teachers and their expertise. However, the present study focuses on the perspectives of ELL parents, and the findings from this study illuminate the general, yet important to acknowledge, asymmetrical power relations that shape the nature of ELL parent-teacher interactions. Below are the discussions of the findings, which are organized into different themes. Each theme is
discussed with one or more examples from the statements made by the participating ELL parents.

Theme One: Teachers’ Judgments

One of the most common misconceptions about linguistically diverse populations is that English language proficiency is linked to intelligence (Cummins, 2000). From such a myth, teachers can easily assume that students or parents who do not speak English fluently lack in their capacity to think at the same levels that people who speak English as their first language. In this regard, one Chinese ELL mother expressed her frustration about teachers’ judgments toward her and her child.

They think our limited English and accents mean our IQs are low, and we cannot think for ourselves. One time a teacher generalized our values of education based on a single encounter with one other Chinese parent. Just because how we educate our children did not meet the teacher’s expectation does not mean that we don’t care about our children. Is there any parent who really doesn’t care about her children and their education?

The parent perceived the teacher prejudged the entire Chinese population based on a single previous encounter with another Chinese parent. She also expressed her surprise at a teacher assuming that Chinese parents do not care about their children’s education, which she alluded to as being unfair. A Chinese father commented:

One time, my wife and I had a parent-teacher conference with our children’s teachers. When we were talking about the teaching of math, my wife just wondered how math was taught since my wife felt that the teaching of math is rather slow here in the US. The teacher did not even explain how teachers taught math here and pointed out that research had shown that this was the best way to do it and that other ways to teach math are not as effective. The teacher also told us that we needed to catch up with how math is being taught here. Even though my wife and I wanted to say more, we felt intimidated by this teacher because we don’t speak English very well. In our hearts, however, we know that it does not mean that we are not intelligent people.

This parent further expressed his frustration regarding teachers’ unwillingness to be open about different ways of teaching math. This parent also commented that the teacher’s insistence on focusing only on how math is taught in the US as opposed to other places in the world is not only unfair but not dehumanizing.

From a postcolonial perspective (e.g., Said, 1994, 2003/1979), the members of the subordinated groups are defined as inferior based on the members of the dominant group’s perspectives. In this case, the parent perceives the teacher’s judgment to be underpinned by prejudice, which is not based on objective facts but rather on myths that inhabit the unconscious mind of the teacher. From this perspective, the teacher is unconsciously and unknowingly operating within a colonial trajectory in which what is different from the dominant culture to which the teacher belongs, i.e., the different level of English proficiency and the different ways to educate children, are considered inferior. The teacher’s perspectives, when viewed through the lens of postcolonial theory, are influenced by the complex history of which the teacher is probably not aware, and yet the teacher’s judgment, which obviously influenced the ELL parent-teacher interaction, reflects the social fact that the presence of the past must not be denied or ignored.

Theme Two: Inability to Influence a Teacher’s Decision Making

Another prominent postcolonial scholar, Gayatri Spivak (1988) in her influential work, Can the subaltern Speak, discusses the importance of speaking voice. More specifically, Spivak argues that white men in colonial time represented brown women as if their representation was objective and neutral. Therefore, brown women did not have speaking voice. Here, what Spivak refers to as a speaking voice in her work is not limited to the actual act of talking but includes the power and influence that the speaking voice has or does not have. One Hispanic ELL parent in this regard stated that, “They tell us that our opinions are welcome and that we are free to voice our opinions but then they do whatever they want to do anyway.”

Another Hispanic ELL parent echoed this statement and stated:

I always feel like I am being talked at but not talked with. They say that they are only interested in students’ learning. My feeling is that teachers report how my children do in school, but they never ask me how my children do at home. They have all the answers ready for me but no question.

Similarly, another Hispanic ELL parent commented:

I feel like I am wasting my time when I talk to my child’s teachers. They already made their decisions about many things, but they are trying to make it seem like it is also my decision. In reality, I know I am not at all a part of any
decision making process. I feel pretty degraded when I am treated as if I have no ability whatsoever to see through how they are not really including me.

All three parents also expressed feelings of intimidation even when the teachers do not directly intimidate them. In his critical essay about a prescriptive model of dialogue, Nicholas Burbulas (2000) asserts that a conception of dialogue is based on a neutral communicative process. However, Burbulas contends that “a dialogue is not an engagement of two (or more) abstract persons” (p. 262), rather it is a “discursive relation situated against the background of previous relations” (p.262) that is imbued with complex asymmetrical power relations. From such a perspective, the imbalance of power that accompanies ELL parent-teacher interactions impacts the dynamics of the interactions. Furthermore, such asymmetry cannot simply be discarded by teachers: the attributes of status, power, and authority have been socially and historically assigned to the teacher’s position and as such may be at least a partial reason why these parents felt intimidated and talked at. While one parent felt that his opinions, even when given the floor, did not really count, the other parent felt that she was not given the floor at all to contribute to her children’s school lives. From a postcolonial theoretical perspective, which attends to power asymmetry in intercultural relations, both are symptoms of unequal power differences that even assertive ELL parents and well-intended teachers cannot entirely escape.

Theme Three: Fear of Negative Repercussion against Speaking Up

Many ELL parents felt that teachers are not genuinely willing to respond to their questions. Said (1994, 2003/1979) contends that how the members of subordinated group are represented and spoken for is largely affected by those who belong to the dominant group. So, for example, in the field of education, the more powerful (teachers who are from dominant groups), knowingly or unknowingly, and often in the name of equality, impose their values on subordinate groups (e.g., ELL students and their parents) without risking any disruption to their own positions. Thus, in the end, it is the ELL parents who are forced through normalizing grids constructed by the teachers. Furthermore, if the members of the subordinated group resist the values of the dominant, the consequences are often negative (Said, 1994). One Hispanic ELL parent stated:

I just feel that the only way to make them happy is if you remain quiet and you just agree with everything they say. I feel like they want to have all the control and when you question them about materials or extra support, they give you that face, how dare you?

Another Hispanic ELL parent similarly claimed:

I recognize their expertise, and sometimes I just want to know more about how they are helping my child. But the minute I ask them a question, they become defensive and I realize I’d better not saying anything. Really, their professional knowledge is lost in their demeanor.

In regards to remaining silent because of the fear of possible negative consequences, one Chinese ELL parent also stated:

There are many times I want to say something or ask something, but I end up not saying anything because I am afraid that my child will be penalized by a teacher because I made the teacher angry by asking her questions.

The idea of possible repercussions that might result from ELL parents’ communication with teachers played a big role in these parents’ decisions to remain quiet. Essentially, these parents seem to calculate the risk before asking questions that might make teachers defensive. In other words, these ELL parents may have been asking if the potential benefits from asking questions is worth the risk of possibly angering their children’s teacher, especially when teachers have an inordinate ability to affect their children’s social, emotional and academic well-being. When viewed through the lens of postcolonial theory, the fear of these ELL parents about the repercussions makes sense, given that the members of the subordinate group suffer the consequences in one form or another for not remaining complicit and assimilating into the dominant values, whereas there are virtually no consequences flowing in the opposite direction for the dominant group.

Implications

Among the many factors that limit productive ELL parental involvement in a child’s school, this study explored the dynamics of ELL parent-teacher interactions by looking at ELL parent-teacher interactions as intercultural relations in which ELL parents (who are from historically marginalized groups) and teachers (who are European Americans) occupy different power positions historically. The teacher population in the middle school described in this study is predominantly European Americans. At a broader level and similarly, the teacher population in public schools in the nation continues to remain predominantly European American (e.g., Berg, Denessen, Hornstra, Voeten, & Holland, 2010), and this is especially true in rural areas (e.g., O’Neal, Ringler, & Fodriquez, 2008). Moreover, this study
focused on the perspectives of ELL parents not because the perspectives of teachers are unimportant or invalid, but to expose the voices of ELL parents in a rural area, which are often overlooked in the literature.

In this study, the three broad themes that emerged as obstacles that inhibit productive ELL parent-teacher interactions in a rural area are teachers’ judgments toward ELL students and their parents; ELL parents’ frustration about their inability to influence a teacher’s decision making; and ELL parents’ fear of repercussions for speaking up. These three themes were analyzed from a standpoint of postcolonial theory which showed that what impacts the ELL parent-teacher interactions includes the histories that are beyond immediate context and yet that constitute positions of ELL parents and teachers that are not on equal power levels. While these socially constructed subject positions are not reversible merely through good intentions, being aware of the unequal power dynamics and the tensions they cause has important implications for teachers working with ELL students and their parents. More specifically, even though unequal power dynamics do and will continue to exist in ELL parent-teacher interactions and even though such inequality are the effects of systemic social conditions, if improvement is going to occur, it will be largely a function of how we as teachers act (or don’t act) in relation to ELL parents. From such a commitment, below are a few implications drawn from this study for all teachers working with ELL students and their parents.

Making an effort to learn from differences, how parents know and view their children for instance, as not something that needs to be overcome, not something that need to be merely tolerated, but as something that serves as a generative ground in which teachers can move beyond their taken-for-granted ways of knowing and seeing children. While the campaign to respect differences in the field of education is not new, in practice, however, we do find it very hard to live together amidst difference (Boles, 1999). People are not all the same and the articulating of differences and truly listening to differences offers teachers fertile soil for thinking outside familiar frames of reference. Interacting with ELL parents who possess different values can be uncomfortable and at times even unsettling for teachers. However, if we are not willing to listen and learn from the parents of ELL students, we do stand to lose by not challenging ourselves and engaging constructively with ELL parents, who may not always share our point of view. This requires teachers to consider what it means to really respect and understand the ELL students and parents so that differences are not merely tolerated but rather may provide the foundations for creativity through which teachers can further assist their ELL students to succeed in school.

As shown in this study, some ELL parents feel intimidated, excluded, and even demeaned by a subtle message that teachers unknowingly communicate that the parents do not care about their children’s education and have not adequately prepared their children to succeed in school. In conclusion, it may be helpful for teachers to make a conscious effort to be more self-reflexive in several ways. First, it is important to respond to the questions that ELL parents may ask in genuinely respectful ways to ensure that the parents are encouraged to ask more questions and to learn what parents do not understand. Second, it is also important to make an effort to not only report how an ELL student is doing in school but to be curious about and interested in learning about how the child is doing at home. In this regard, teachers need to learn to value the knowledge of parents and recognize the contributions that they can make to the children’s success in school. In fact, it would serve teachers well to see the ELL parents as essential partners in ELL students’ optimal learning. This means that teachers have to learn to listen—“patiently, intently, and respectfully—to parental perspectives on their children” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003, p. 230), so that teachers learn the child’s life outside of school and convey to parents that they do care about their children.

Moreover, it is critical for teachers in rural areas, who are mostly whites and have little exposure to diversity, to remind themselves that a child’s and parent’s proficiency level in English and their accents cannot be equated with their intelligence level. While teachers may very well understand this concept theoretically, in practice, such judgments occur more often than not (e.g., Cummins, 2000), and it requires a conscious effort for teachers not to demean the ELL students and parents by making false assumptions. Lastly, this study is not suggesting at all that such reflexive work for teachers working in rural areas is easy. In fact, creating new spaces for ELL parent-teacher interactions in which teachers genuinely welcome parents’ questions and their ways of seeing and knowing their child, and seeing them as invaluable resources for working successfully with their children may require a continual effort, struggle, and hard work. Such an effort is one of the critical requirements in facilitating ELL parent-teacher communication that are open and collaborative which in turn will benefit ELL students’ educational, social, and emotional growth in rural areas. In this respect, teacher training programs need
to focus more on teaching pre-service teachers about working with parents in general and with ELL parents more specifically.

References


About the author:

Jenna Min Shim is an associate professor in Educational Studies at the University.
Perspectives of a Rural Music Educator: 
A Narrative Journey through ‘Sense of Place’

Janet Spring
University of Toronto

There is a scarcity of research in contemporary rural studies in Canada, particularly pertaining to education. Discrepancies exist in definitions of rural and rurality. What is the meaning of rural, and how do educators define their teaching praxes? This study explores how one music teacher negotiates her role identity in a rural setting through the conceptual framework of sense of place, and how ‘place’ influences her education praxis. Grounded in the narrative methodological perspectives of Connelly and Clandinin (2006), this study investigates the lived experiences of one educator from a place-based lens. Findings indicate that a place-based curriculum may highlight positive aspects of rural areas, address shortcomings, and encourage rural youth to return to their rural roots.

Key Words: rural, narrative, story, place, sense of place, place-based education, critical pedagogy of place

As I look out my living room window, I see the combine driving through the rows and rows of golden wheat. For the past week, wheat heads have been bending ever so slightly as a reminder that it is time for the crop to be harvested and stored away in the grain bins until it is picked up to be processed for human consumption. Our family has been waiting for this day. Harvest is a very busy time on the farm. As the combine cuts down the wheat, the grain is loaded on the go— a hectic place, for the crops must be harvested before the weather closes in. To me, my place and space is full of activity, yet spacious. Through every window in my home and at my school I see some indication that I live in the country, whether it be fields of crops, large farm machinery traveling down the road, or the big yellow school bus stopping at the end of each family’s lane to pick the children up and deliver them to the rural school where I teach music, as I have done for the past 30 years.

I enjoy my rural ‘place’ with its strong community ties that make me feel safe and valued. The children I teach are my neighbour’s children and the children of the parents I once taught. We know mostly everyone in the area and the history of the families. Yet the rural landscape is slowly changing. Our family farm that once was a hundred acres has expanded ten-fold. As I drive to school, I pass newly built subdivisions and notice the newcomers in the area. My ‘place’ is gradually expanding, and so is the essence of my place.

What is Place?

I have lived in two contrasting ‘places’ in my life, in an urban place growing up and then in a rural place, where I have lived throughout my music education career. Although I still maintain some attachment to the urban space of my early years, my music teaching career and immediate family have grounded me in my rural area. ‘Place’ therefore plays a very important part in my life, as it may for many others, for while my personal space holds sentimental value, my rural setting aligns me with family, friends and my community. A sense of place therefore incorporates not only the geographical setting, but also the impact of historical, social, and cultural influences on people’s lives, as well as the ensuing relationships they develop within their communities.

Wyly (2008) describes place as “invested with meaning, history and symbolism by various individuals and groups” (p. 2), which develops traditionally over a long period of time. Gieryn (2000) further explains that place “is filled up by people, practices, objects, and representations” (p. 465). According to Agnew, place represents “the local structure of feeling” (as cited in Wyly, 2008, p. 13). This condition of feeling may represent the sensitivities of a community of people, whether in a rural area, an indigenous community, a community that bonds together in an inner-city urban setting, or a small community of people coming together socially for a special purpose or function, no matter where they are located. Wyly (2008) clarifies further, “not surprisingly, the local conception of place is closely associated with ideas of community” (p. 13). Community however, may be grounded in a certain geographical space, or could be undefined in infinite space, such as an online chat group that comes together for a ‘local structure of feeling’ in boundless space. Community is also a term that is utilized particularly when related to rural areas, and may be inclusive or exclusive (Jentsch & Shucksmith, 2004; Leyshon, 2008; Leyshon & Bull, 2008, 2011).
Utilizing a phenomenological perspective, Stefanovic (1998) critiques place stating, understanding and ‘knowing’ place is a qualitative experience that “extends beyond the objective boundaries of geometrical space” (p. 32) where humans are “immersed in the environment, interpreting, intuiting, sensing, responding emotionally and intellectually, and meaningfully assigning signification in a complexity of ways” (p. 32 - 33). She qualifies ‘special places’ further stating, they are “more than merely lone points of geographical interest, they may reveal something essential about human ways of being-in-the-world” (p. 33). Some people may become attached to a particular place and establish an identity with it, holding certain traditions, rituals and habits, developing a strong satisfaction and salient attachment to place.

From a sociological perspective, the work of Gieryn (2000) provides a comprehensive representation of place. He states, “Place is remarkable and what makes it is an unwindable spiral of material form and interpretive understandings and experiences” (p. 471). Epiphanic moments also occur that make a place a very personal ‘space’, evoking memorable experiences and emotional responses. In addition, people identify with ‘place’ and are classified by their locale – ‘She is a Torontonian’ or, ‘She was born and raised in the country; she is a country girl’.

According to Gieryn (2000), place possesses “continuity, uniqueness, boundaries, purpose and function” (p.465). Place can be a “unique spot in the universe” (p. 465) which has a physical form and becomes a significant place “when it enconces history or utopia, danger or security, identity or memory” (p. 465). A place is therefore complete when it contains a geographical “location, material form and meaningfulness” (p. 466). Consequently, people become attached to their ‘place’; for it provides stability and a safe, secure environment in which they can share a sense of being connected. It encompasses a historical perspective, related to memories of past and present associations and evokes an emotional attachment (Brooks, 2011; Corbett, 2010; Gieryn, 2000; Hummon, 1997). When a person possesses a particular attachment to place, from a geographical, emotional and spiritual sense, he or she is thought to have a ‘sense of place’. This feeling or emotion is one that has been nurtured over time and one that has been influenced by day-to-day lived experiences. However, places are not always pleasant. People can also feel marginalized or threatened by certain places, when those places evoke feelings of fear, distress, or trauma or unpleasant memories (Holt, 2004; Leyshon & Bull, 2011; Panelli, 2002).

Rural Perspectives

A thorough examination of the literature on rural issues provides a perplexing conundrum. The literature is full of stereotypical beliefs, and contains inconsistent data representations and arguments that perpetuate a rural myth of being unique, (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Cicchinelli & Dean, 2005; Gieryn, 2000; Hardre, Sullivan & Cresson, 2009; Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2004), and also as being backward and unrefined (Theobald &Wood, 2008). Nairn, Panelli and McCormack (2003) discuss the dichotomy that exists between rural and urban places, painting contrasting pictures of depravity or a utopia, and depicting ‘rural’ as inclusive and ‘urban’ as alienating - the opposite.

In Canada, the term ‘rural’ is defined as a statistical depiction (Statistics Canada, 2002). This presents an unclear foundation for educators and researchers who attempt to portray an accurate representation of rural life, rural education and more specifically, rural music education. Having so many definitions compounds the confusion, and presents an insipid, pale perspective of the concept of ‘rural’. Consequently, the most accurate and appropriate resources for depicting rural music education practices and teacher beliefs are the teachers’ stories themselves. As Howley, Theobald and Howley (2005) observe, “The rural in rural is not most significantly the boundary around it, but the meanings inherent in rural lives, wherever lived” (p. 1). Yet, even these stories are few and far between, and in terms of a Canadian perspective, limited. Teachers who live and teach in rural areas must therefore present themselves according to who they are within their geographical rural space, what and how they practice in their place, what their emotional attachment is, and how they feel about living and teaching in their space and place. In other words, what does it mean to have a “sense of place”? In addition, how might understanding and applying place-based pedagogical perspectives to music education influence the lives of rural children and the rural voice?

Rural School Characteristics

The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (2007) reports that in the province of Ontario, there are over 300,000 rural students attending elementary and secondary schools in districts that include small towns with populations of fewer than 100,000 and rural settings with populations less than that figure.
The Rural Ontario Municipal Association (2011) comments on the importance of rural schools stating, “Rural schools provide a focal space for community activities to take shape and linkages between community members and families to be made (p. 8). In other words, the rural school provides more than education; it is the bonding factor in a rural community. In rural literature, the term ‘community’ is also discussed as being an integral part of schooling (Derrett, 2003; Dixon, 2000; Gieryn, 2000) and the school is often referred to as the “heart of the community” (Woods, p. 579).

Studies related to rural schools have reported that small rural elementary and high schools have characteristics that are very favorable for students, teaching staff, parents and community members. As small schools at the end of the last decade were closing or under threat of closure in the United States, and amalgamating into larger ‘super’ schools, researchers and advocacy groups began to investigate the rural issue further, addressing and promoting the benefits of smaller schools (Hunt, 2009; Isbell, 2005). This literature discusses positive attributes of rural schools such as close ties between teacher and student, sustained contact throughout elementary and secondary school among teachers and students, and a strong bond connecting elementary and secondary teaching staff and students. Reported also is a closeness and a reciprocal relationship of reliance between the school and community, collaboration and partnerships amongst rural businesses and schools, and a strong sense of value to place. Music education research identifies a strong music peer support that occurs between older and younger students in rural settings, which is not necessarily characteristic of larger urban schools (Bates, 2011; Hardre et al. 2009; Barley & Beesley, 2007).

The literature also presents negative aspects of rural teaching and rural schools. Particularly noteworthy are these factors: isolation from major centers, lack of professional development and resources for teachers, sub-standard facilities, lack of funds for extra-curricular programs, lack of privacy in and outside of school, and a feeling of inferiority when interacting in an urban social/musical milieu (Bates, 2011; Budge, 2006). Research related to rural music education also claims that music teachers are isolated from other music colleagues due to demographics, that there is a limited number of students for ensembles, and that local communities generally provide funding for instruments and other music supplies (Isbell, 2005; Hunt 2009). However music has historically played an important role in rural areas, grounding residents in their places and linking them to their community. Hudson discusses how music creates an identity and an attachment to a particular locale. He states, “Both historically and contemporarily there are strong links between music and senses of place and identities, both of people and places” (p. 626). School music programs also create an identity for a community, for according to Hudson, “making music, produce[s] places” (p. 627). Hunt (2009) comments however, “we should learn about the music teachers’ roles and the role of the music programs in any given context, such as urban and rural” (p. 45).

Consequently, questions arise as to how positive and negative factors have affected actual rural music education praxes. A more in-depth approach to rural music education using a narrative methodology is thus needed to investigate and clarify the issues that positively and negatively affect rural music educators and either negate or validate the popular assumptions found in the current literature. Teachers’ voices and personal perspectives are generally absent from the literature (Brook, 2011; Malats, 2004). This study will therefore provide a narrative account of one participant’s interpretation of pertinent issues in rural education and in providing music instruction to rural students.

**Limitations of the Research**

The teacher selected to participate in the study is known to the researcher and teaches in the same school board where the researcher is employed. I therefore have a bias, as I am researching in ‘my own backyard’. This allows for greater knowledge of ‘insider status’ of the specific context, and greater depth of conversation due to shared experiences. However care must be taken to interrogate assumptions based on past experience. The findings of the study are not intended to be generalizable to areas outside the specific research area or individual teacher experiences.

**Methodology**

The participant chosen for this study is representative of the few music teachers in her board, in that music teachers are not hired specifically to teach music in a school. Music is taught to curriculum expectations, only if and when there is a teacher in the school who is either qualified or demonstrates an interest in teaching the subject, and if times and scheduling permit. In other words, it is not a ‘protected’ subject. Yet unofficially, this participant is the ‘music teacher’ in the school, as well as the designated teacher librarian and preparation time teacher. A preparation time teacher provides relief time to regular classroom teachers,
while they plan and collaborate with other teachers. In this case, the participant teaches music and other subjects through preparation time. She also offers an extra-curricular choir program during recesses, lunches and after school.

In this study, I employ narrative methodology to investigate the lived experiences of one rural educator from a place-based lens. The study is grounded in the narrative methodological perspectives of Clandinin and Connelly (1992, 1994, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2000), Connelly and Clandinin (1986, 1988, 1990, 2006), and Clandinin, Pushor and Orr (2007), with a focus on the importance of ‘personal, practical knowledge’ (Connelly & Clandinin, 1986). Connelly & Clandinin (1991) clarify this phrase stating, “it is knowledge that is constructed and reconstructed as we live out our stories and retell and relive them through processes of reflection” (p. 125). Reflecting on stories and experiences is therefore key to the qualitative process, and particularly noteworthy in understanding teachers and their processes of teaching.

It is through the compilation of stories and interview data that the lived experiences (Van Manen, 1990; Eisner, 1991; Beattie, 2009) of educators provide the opportunity to investigate the knowledge gained through professional practices, inside and outside the classroom. As data are gathered and then composed in a narrative or ‘storied’ form, the narrative becomes a vehicle to expore and portray rich information. Beattie (1995a, 1995b, 2000, 2001, 2009) provides a methodological framework in her concept of the importance of teachers’ stories in constructing professional knowledge in teaching. In a music educator’s professional and personal life, these detailed stories can illuminate and inform the “personal, professional and scholarly” (Beattie, 2009, p. 29) knowledge related to the art of teaching music, of performing music and dialogueuing with others in and throughout the process. Richardson (2009) and Pereira (2009) apply Beattie’s notion of the importance of stories in a music education sense as stories allow researchers to “understand the meaning of narrative ways of knowing and being, and of learning to enact them in their personal, professional and scholarly lives” (Beattie, 2009, p. 30). As I investigate the lived experiences of one rural music educator through a narrative lens, my participant and I as the researcher come to a greater understanding of the ways the arts have shaped us as human beings and how these lived experiences inform and provide further knowledge of a personal, practical, professional and scholarly nature. Utilizing narrative inquiry in a collaborative sense, we acquire a deeper knowledge of the subject through informal dialogue, open-ended interview sessions and reading of our stories to, “reflect, reconnect, reframe, relate and re-imagine [our] musical life experiences in the context of building [our] “personal, practical knowledge” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1986, p. 293) - in essence, “coming to know what [we] know” (Richardson, 2006, p. 79). In these circumstances, the researcher also becomes a co-participant and is no longer a mere scribe, but rather a contributor in ‘living out the stories’ through a mutual relationship with the participant, in which knowledge is shared and built upon for greater understanding.

**Data Collection**

Interviews were my main source of data gathering and occurred throughout a four-month period. Interviews followed an open-ended procedure, where the participant was asked to provide a background of her teaching praxis and how she came to teach in a rural school. All subsequent interview sessions were completely open-ended and initiated by informal unrestricted questions to springboard the conversations. Ten questions were used throughout the seven interviews that focused on the definition of rural, community, the role of space and place in her music education praxis, the issues of living and teaching in a rural community, the role of the music educator and community she teaches in, and next steps to inform rural music education practitioners and policy makers in general. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) discuss the relevance of this interview format stating, “Questions emerge from the immediate context and [are] asked in the natural course of things; there is no predetermination of question topics or wording” (p. 271). Cohen et al. remark that this type of interview “increases the salience and relevance of questions; interviews are built on and emerge from observations” (p. 271). They also caution, however, that the information collected may vary from participant to participant. Nevertheless, this unstructured interview format provided rich data throughout the numerous sessions. The interviews took place in a relaxed atmosphere in a location chosen by the participant. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed, then verified for accuracy by the participant. Further meetings occurred to discuss any questions or comments that emerged during the interviews to clarify and add to the data already acquired.

Journaling by the researcher and participant also occurred via email throughout the data-gathering period. After the participant reviewed the interview transcripts, she added short narratives to further explain points that were raised during the interviews. Issues raised in the journal narratives were discussed...
later at the interview sessions. Clandinin and Connelly (1994) relate that journals are “a powerful way for individuals to give accounts of their experience” (p. 421).” as well as “another method of creating field texts” (p. 421). The authors remark that educators’ journals of thoughts and experiences “weave together their accounts of the private and the professional, capturing fragments of experience in attempts to sort themselves out” (p. 421). The researcher re-storied the data gathered from the journals and the participant verified the resulting narrative stories for accuracy.

Findings

Rural Definitions

The following findings are based on data gathered throughout the interview process and the participant’s narrative stories. The participant teaches in a rural hamlet, where the school is the only building in the area. Consequently, she defines ‘rural’ in terms of the ‘lack of’, where there is an absence of transportation, resources, proper facilities and particularly, traditional ‘places’ that define a community. She remarked,

“I would define rural by the ‘lack of’ or what is not there. I used to find it really difficult teaching the community portion of the grade 1 social science curriculum because what’s in your community? Well there’s nothing in the community! And I don’t think the curriculum addresses that very well. There is no bank, there is a corner store, no post office per se, no grocery store, no fire department... so it’s from what’s not there, rather than what’s there! There are no sidewalks, and again the grade 1 curriculum, which asks, what type of house do you live in? There are no apartment buildings! The kids live in single-family dwellings. The curriculum would have the kids draw a picture of [their] community. It was usually one long concession road and one tiny house and a then a whole blank canvas because there was nothing there...Most of them are bussed, with no available transit- they must be driven everywhere.” (Participant Interview, March 5, 2012)

Corbett (2010) outlines the concern of contemporary rural schools and how they are disconnected from traditional curricula. He discusses the issues raised regarding implementation of a rural school project in Nova Scotia in which his school staff examined curriculum materials used in the classroom. He states, “Not surprisingly, there was little actual local content or recognizable local representation, and that if we were to look at the school as a large text; it was fundamentally a story about somewhere else” (p. 117). Rural schools, he suggests, should therefore “develop curriculum from community sources”. In that way, flexibility in curriculum will allow rural teachers to highlight the community place instead of following a curriculum that is more urban based.

The participant also discussed the ‘lack of’ in rural in terms of resources and facilities. She stated

The ‘lack of’... no sewers; that in our school was a huge issue because that was why the grades 7s and 8s ended up moving to another school to lower the school population to fit the septic capacity. Everyone’s on septic. The water issue is a really big deal there. There was lead in all the water and all the piping had to be replaced so that there was only one treated line coming in, things like that you wouldn’t find in a regular school, in a town school, because you would have full access to properly treated water. Being on septic is really quite different than being in town.... At present, our school is slated to close in the future.... For now the new push to send the students from grades 4 through 6 to the small town school, where they sent the grades 7 and 8s a few years ago and make the school only Junior Kindergarten to grade 3, will keep the school only open for a few more years. But it will probably close in future, and if that happens, every single child will have to be bussed for a long distance; they don’t want that!.... And the fate of the community? Really, if the school dies, the community will as well. (Participant Interview, March 5, 2012)

In this rural area, the lack of proper facilities and resources lends support to a move to close the rural school, which is an integral part of the community, due to the fact that it is the only building that services the rural community and surrounding area. The participant believes that if the rural school closes, the viability and sustainability of the area is at stake.

The participant defines the term ‘rural’ through social interaction, where a rural place spawns familiarity, inclusiveness and togetherness, a safe place in which to live and teach. Students are classified as very well-behaved, inclusive of diversity in relation to race, age and gender, and parents are noted as positive and very supportive of the rural school objectives and endeavors, such as rallying to fight school closures and standing for the continuation of the music program. The rural population in the school district supports whole school music events, as the music program provides arts activities and concerts for the rural area. If there
Functioning in a Rural Place

The data reveal an emergent theme of adaptation which includes revising lessons and ensemble groupings to work within the small rural school community, bussing grade seven and eight students after school from the ‘town’ school to the rural school (so that they have the opportunity to participate in the French choir), and adapting to the physical structure of the outdated, inadequate school building. The participant is a librarian and preparation time teacher, therefore she teaches music in the library. The library is located in a small, regular classroom and the space doubles as a music room as well. Although the tiny space houses the library book collection, filing cabinets, display cases for library use, students must sit on the floor in a very small area for music class and for choir practices.

A second theme of affirmation emerged from the data, validating the positives of the rural area. The importance of affirmation of rural place and space is documented in academic literature, drawing attention to the fact that current curriculum tends to be based on urban characteristics, thus assuming aspects of urban living as being the norm, and thereby encouraging movement away from rural areas for better opportunities (Corbett, 2009). The participant remarked:

*I find that I am always affirming the positives of our rural area. With the curriculum and students not fitting into the curriculum categories, you tell them what there is where they live is just as good as living somewhere else. I believe that the curriculum almost teaches the children that better opportunities are in urban areas. I can think of a really clear case where that is absolutely true. Two kids who grew up in our area...one stayed back to farm, and the other one went off to university and now is doing very well somewhere else. And he is considered to be the success whereas the other one who stayed back isn’t. And yet you know, it’s a big, prosperous farm, but by society’s views, he is not as successful as the other one. And I hear sometimes a comment, oh ya, she’s moved back to the area to teach as if she is less a success than other people who maybe got a teaching job somewhere else. And for some reason that rural area entices people back who have gone to school and who have come back and decided to seek employment in that rural area or in the outskirts or in the urban areas that are close by.... But sometimes they are not considered as successful just because they want to come home to the rural area, or close to it.* (Participant interview, April 2, 2012)

The attitude of discounting the significance of rural is well documented in many areas of academic literature (Brook, 2011; Corbett, 2010; Theobald & Wood, 2010).

In terms of subsidization, the participant discussed the issues of having to make do with the outdated music, library and classroom resources that were provided, or purchase materials herself. She remarked, *I spent a lot of money purchasing musical supplies that were needed, but not provided* (Participant interview, March 5, 2012). She also discussed the lack of professional development opportunities available to her rural school staff and how she tried to outsource workshops to expand her knowledge and familiarity of new music materials that were available for purchase. In this way, she was subsidizing professional development opportunities that to her should have been available during the professional development days, or as in-service workshops as others subjects are, and provided by the board or the union during the instructional day. She stated, *Very little PD is offered. A few years ago, a weekend workshop was offered for Orff. I went, but it was on my own time and a distance away* (Participant interview, March 5, 2012). Goertz & Duffy (as cited in Burkett, 2011) state, “The pursuit of PD is particularly problematic for teachers in rural school districts (p. 53). And when seeking PD opportunities, rural music teachers face unique challenges of time, place, and distance...
that can affect teacher attitude and, ultimately, delivery of instruction” (p. 54). The lack of professional development through collaboration with other music educators is also particularly challenging. She remarked:

Most teachers would have at least one colleague to consult for information or help, or with whom to collaborate but with music, that is not the case. I started in music just after the demise of the specialist teachers, and those people were back in regular classrooms and were no longer involved with music at all. Now consultants have a new name and are ‘Arts resource teachers’ and have so many portfolios on their plate that they are spread thin and maybe do not even have a lot of expertise in all the areas of the Arts. For help with curriculum issues one consults with the Principal at least, but that is not the case with music. In most cases the principal has no music background whatsoever. (Participant personal communication, March 20, 2012)

As a result, music teachers in rural areas face issues of isolation from other music educators, from professional development opportunities, and from professional advice.

Role of the Music Educator

The music educator’s role is wide and varied in the participant’s rural area. She classified herself as teacher-librarian and planning time teacher, with responsibilities that may include teaching music and other subjects. However she is not identified as a ‘music teacher’, despite her ‘volunteer’, extracurricular role in preparing students for the rural music festival. She assumes the position of whole school choral conductor, French choir conductor, solo singing coach, and in her position as planning time music teacher for all students from junior kindergarten to grade three. This role extends throughout the school year. Her teaching responsibilities are directly dependent on the administration’s agenda, the availability of time and resources as well as her interest in taking on extra responsibility for music, which is usually on her own time after school or during the lunch hour. She stated.

I am the music teacher. Kindergarten - 3, choral director for whole school ensemble, primary, junior choir, French choir, coordinator of music festival, solo coach, special events music teacher- assemblies, festivals, retirements”.

“When special funding packages come through for the Arts, I am the music purchaser- I had to purchase a new school music curriculum this past year with little assistance from anyone”.

When mail comes in for the Music Department Rep, I am the music teacher, but never called the music teacher otherwise”. I do music outside of my normal teaching responsibilities and through planning time because I am interested and love the subject! But it [music] always seems to be at the bottom of the ‘important’ list. (Participant Interview, May 12, 2012)

There seems to be little or no continuity in music education in her rural place and in other schools in the area. Thus programs vary from school to school depending on the availability of a qualified and/or interested teacher who is willing to assume the role. There seems also to be a lack of school board initiative to provide music to all students on a regular basis and a lack of place-based programs that exemplify and promote the positive aspects of the rural area in all subject areas. In her situation, she defines her music education identity as opportunistic and unstable because her position is circumstantial. As a result, the participant suggests that a place-based educational perspective would connect her rural place with the school community and the curriculum to eliminate these gaps in rural education.

Moving Forward: A Pedagogy of Place

The study of education from a place-based, place-conscious perspective is grounded in the lives of students and positioned in their surrounding environment. Sobel (2004) characterizes place-based education “as the pedagogy of community, the reintegration of the individual into her home ground and the restoration of the essential links between a person and her place” (p. ii). He also believes that it critiques location, the character of place, and the sustainability of place through a narrative story telling process. Gruenewald (2003) takes this idea one step further and poses that critical pedagogy and place-based education can be amalgamated to a critical pedagogy of place. He states, “Articulating a critical pedagogy of place is thus a response against educational reform policies and practices that disregard places and that leave assumptions about the relationship between education and the politics of economic development unexamined” (p. 3). From a political and educational perspective, rural needs are often disregarded and blanket policy issues are not relevant to rural areas (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy & Dean, 2005; Wallin, 2008). Political decisions that call for the cancellation of special programs such as music and the closure of rural schools are often passed quickly without continued consultation. An adoption of a critical pedagogy of place may help to address these issues that are specific to local areas.
Specifically related to rural curriculum studies, White and Reid (2008) comment, “Place conscious pedagogies open a way for all teacher education institutions to address the needs of rural schools and their communities - and indeed provide a framework for enriching the engagement of all teachers in their school communities, regardless of location” (p. 1-2).

A curriculum, explicit to certain rural areas may help teachers become aware of the needs of their school community. For example, in the participant’s area, one curriculum focus may be music. It fulfills an essential community need and fosters musical growth in students, and instills a sense of discipline, pride, and sense of place. Other communities may have a different focus, such as physical education, visual arts, science, or outdoor education. Nevertheless, place-based education fulfills many roles, and according to Sobel (2004), “is not simply a way to integrate the curriculum around a study of place, but a means of inspiring stewardship and an authentic renewal and revitalization of civic life” (p. iii).

Perhaps the most important aspect of place-based education is to inspire students to care for their community - the rural people, fellow students, teachers, parents, and particularly the environment on a local and global level. If students adopt a caring attitude toward their rural locale, they may attain the social habits necessary to expand their sense of caring for place further afar. It is also paramount that board personnel and educators adopt a reciprocal caring stewardship so that all directions in education, whether academic and/or social, promote a place-based framework based on concern and compassion for all. Oftentimes, as discussed by the participant and documented in the literature, curriculum objectives subliminally encourage students to leave rural areas (Theobald & Wood, 2010; Corbett, 2010). Sobel (2004) critiques this perspective remarking, “there are often pressures for communities and regions to subordinate themselves to the dominant economic models and to devalue their local cultural identity, traditions, and history in preference to a flashily marketed homogeneity” (p. i). As a result, youth leave their rural area, with feelings of its inferiority in search of post-secondary schooling and to find employment and ‘better’ opportunities in urban regions. Through a place-based curriculum, these misconceptions of ‘rural equals backward’ (Theobald, 2005, p. 112) will be deconstructed as the students are taught the benefits of rural ‘places’ and the importance of supporting their local communities. And we must not underestimate the positive influences that rural school perspectives have on future attitudes. “Because of the centrality of schools in most rural communities, rural schools have the potential to function as both catalyst and role model for addressing a wide range of community needs and options for the future” (Leo-Nyquist & Theobald, 1997; p. 3).

A place-based perspective may positively influence the direction of academic literature on rural education and supply pertinent data to guide educational policy. At present in Ontario, we rely on information that is based on census data, which offers blurred and stereotypical perspectives of rural people. Some of the statistical data could be representative of urban communities as well. Instead, the context of rural must be brought out in the literature (Coladarci, 2007; p. 2) through the lived stories of rural people that depict what it is like to live in a rural area, and what rural means to them. Only through these narrative stories, will we deconstruct the myths, and explore individual and local realities to either discount or validate these ‘perceptions’.

Despite many positive attributes of place-based education, Nespor (2008) addresses some pertinent issues that come to light. Firstly, she argues that place-based education fails to recognize communities as constantly changing, and “continually interacting with what is outside their recognized boundaries” (p. 480), even though some communities, like my rural ‘village’, tend to uphold local traditions and resist change. Secondly, Nespor cautions that further research into the complexities of place and sense of place needs to be completed to give place-based pedagogical theories further credibility. Usually linked to an environmental perspective, this theory must also address sociological issues and viewpoints on place. Thirdly, and most significantly, Nespor expresses concerns of place-based education to be “inattentive to racism, classism, ableism, and gender-based discrimination” (p. 489), which marginalizes minority groups. Since minority groups do exist in rural areas, their voices must be heard. Place-based education must therefore address this important issue in order to be acceptable, effective and equitable.

Conclusion

As our area rural schools and communities prepare for the upcoming Fall Fair celebrations, the elementary and high school students participate in academic and social activities pertaining to the fair. For a short period of time, classroom instructional lessons deviate from the traditional curriculum materials. Teachers integrate lessons into the school day that highlight the positives of our rural areas. Students prepare their entries of vegetables, fruits, baking, crafts and livestock for the fair competitions at home on their own time. However, after the celebrations are over, the short-lived, place-based
approach is quickly abandoned. Yet many students and other community members continue to feel this strong attachment to place and sense of belonging or a sense of place, because of these special community events that seem to bring people together.

A year round comprehensive place-based curriculum may then be an asset for all schools, enabling positive aspects of each community to be highlighted and modeled, particularly in rural areas where the school is sometimes the only institution and/or building in the vicinity. However, further research is needed to deconstruct the ways in which rural communities can adapt to and benefit from social, political and educational changes in demographics. Further studies to explore realities in rural music education that relate to place and sense of place may also shed light on contemporary rural music education programs and the issues that surround these. The findings may inform current rural music educators and prospective teachers who teach or hope to more effectively teach in rural communities.

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**About the author:**

Janet Spring has taught vocal and instrumental music in rural Ontario. As a doctoral candidate at the University of Toronto, her dissertation investigates perspectives in rural music education using collaborative narrative methodology through a conceptual framework of sense of place.