Growing up, I spent my summers with my grandparents who lived in a rural community in New Mexico. My grandmother showed me how to farm and taught me to walk rather than ride in a car. We baked bread and did science experiments while my grandfather brought in fresh honey from his hives and pecans from his trees. We canned, spoke to everyone we met, and caught frogs at twilight. The text of my life experience was characterized by our daily interactions and their stories of living in sod houses, making butter to sell in town, and having to pick cotton instead of starting school in September. The time I spent with them I now see as the text that shaped who I am and eventually prompted me to dedicate my life to the field of education where I might share my stories with students who travel on different paths than my own.

I was working with writing instruction in a rural middle school that happened to be situated in one of the most rural, impoverished, and frankly forgotten counties in the southern United States. During one of my visits, I overheard a conversation between two of the sixth-grade girls who were in a heated discussion about their weekend plans.

“Listen, I got to go over to that Wal-Mart ’cause we don’t got nothing here. Where else am I gonna go?”

“Yeah but you couldn’t come over because you were off buying your stuff. What was I supposed to do?”

“Yeah but we don’t got nothing! What do you expect?”

Too often rural communities are seen through a deficit point of view not only by outsiders looking in but also by the inhabitants themselves. As a result, the rich community values, history, and cultural heritage gets lost because the children of these communities see lack rather than riches and simplicity rather than complexity. One of the resulting issues facing rural areas is brain drain. Brain drain, otherwise known as the loss of talent to outside opportunities, affects societal stewardship and affects the overall growth and future development of the community (Carr and Kefalas 20; Sherman and Sage 2). According to Hannah Estes et al., it may be the lure of education that draws students away from their homes (10). The path of going to college, becoming exposed to the larger dominant culture, and then choosing to settle in a metropolitan area seems to be the preferred cultural pattern for those students who are encouraged to leave home (Carr and Kefalas 54; Sherman and Sage 4). The result of this migration is that those who are educated and skilled do not return home, thereby denying their home community the fruits of their accomplishments.

Brain drain is first an economic threat. Rural areas are facing lower population growth rates in comparison to their urban counterparts. Between 2000 and 2009, rural counties grew at a rate of 2.9 percent compared to 9.1 percent in urban counties (Gallardo). This loss was exacerbated by economic shifts that left rural areas with a scarcity of employment opportunities. First agriculture waned as a source of employment, and then industries...
that once maintained entire communities became outsourced to countries with lower costs of labor (Sherman and Sage 2; Wake 23). Communities had scarce choices for the employment of their children (Artz and Orazem 164). With a lack of employment choices, communities struggled to retain those students who would encourage innovation, movement, and growth. The outlying result of this loss is that rural communities labor only to sustain and maintain rather than develop.

Brain drain is also a cultural threat. Rural areas suffer because the potentially successful members of the community, those people who could be counted as mentors or community pillars, are simply not there (Carr and Kefalas 124). What ensues is a cultural gap that begins to negatively delineate an increasingly stagnant place (Gruenewald 5; Lyson 133). As well, the aging population loses its voice and no one remains to hear, revere, and understand the importance of their stories (Lockette 17; Sherman and Sage 4). Rural schools struggle as they try to remain the centers of the communities. They often serve as the most stable entities in towns facing financial peril due to economic shifts and widespread poverty (Estes et al. 10; Petrin et al. 296). This puts the schools in a precarious position. On one hand it is their job to educate and provide civic leadership to their communities (Theobald and Curtiss 108). But on the other, when they do educate children, showing them their potential, those children may choose to find economic opportunities outside their communities. This situation creates tension between the schools and their communities and questions ensue regarding the value of education (Corbett 2; Esposito 72; Sherman and Sage 3).

Schools must then support their communities in ways that reach beyond the Friday night football game. They must be institutions that develop the social capital of their students as it is informed by the surrounding culture. Rural communities have a connection to the land and a set of shared values and beliefs that revolve around the importance of place, kinship, and community (Gruenewald 5). This shared belief system distinguishes these communities and should be embraced not only by the teacher in the classroom but also by the politician in the legislature and the academic in the university (Howley 538). The application of social capital assumes that rural citizens are living in their communities by choice, and as such they share a common history and bond that extends to the stewardship of their community. Within this, community capital should be seen as a great wealth of information that may lend itself toward creating sustenance and strength (Gruenewald 3; Lyson 131; Theobald 107). It is this idea that researchers, educators, and community leaders may use to envision new ways toward the salvation of rural space. It is also this idea of stewardship that can be used as the transformative step meant to inspire students to become change agents who question, build, and define their futures and the future of their home communities.

One way to build a sense of meaning in students regarding their culture of place is to challenge the stories we are telling and the text we are using as a basis for curriculum. After all, the idea of text is fluid. David Gruenewald contends that the text students read should be experientially rooted in students’ lives and practices (3). Text should be meaningful and authentically connected to the lives students live. Moreover, students’ reading experiences should build from their inner world as they manifest in the students’ outer identity. When text is meaningful and provides space for students to connect to its meaning, change can come through the writer. Lauren Esposito posited that if one develops the writer by providing authentic tasks rooted in the social capital of the student, the writing will consequentially develop (71). So the formula for supporting students as the school tries to instill a sense of social capital would be to provide meaningful texts, through which the students can identify, and then allow the students to begin to enact their power as change agents, as they write about their experiences in connecting with and understanding the meaning of that text that has real implications to their lives.

Louise Rosenblatt names this transformative interaction between the reader and the text as...
transactionalism. Rosenblatt explained that transactionalism, a change that takes place in readers as they make meaning from text, is evidenced in student-created writing (Reader 27). It is in this writing that the significance of the readers' experiences and how they have changed is constructed. Transactionalism is a literary approach that embraces all responses as valid and important (O’Flahavan and Wallis 32). These interactions and interpretations are reliant on the contextual power of the reader and the text that transform the reading and the reader, resulting in writing that evidences this change (Rosenblatt, “Continuing” 351). The foundation of this theory is that text allows the reader to experience the life and thoughts that created the text. Then it provides space for the readers to access their underlying cultural capital and use it to connect with text.

The Beginning of the Change

I worked with a sixth-grade gifted and talented class in the rural middle school mentioned earlier in the article for an academic year. As I worked with the teacher, I learned her story and began to see her life as an example of stewardship, and her path as one rich with social capital. Ms. Hopper spent her life in the community, apart from her time at college, when even then she came home every weekend. She told me about her life as a girl who had to work to overcome the roles to which she was so often consigned. She reminded me that when you are told you aren’t good enough, you shouldn’t be here, and that you should go back home, developing resilience is difficult, to say the least. But as she shared her story, I realized that this was the text the students needed “read” to better understand those resources inherent in the stories of the strong. They needed to understand the tale of someone who stayed home and who had chosen to actively build the future of her community.

To allow the students to access this “text” I introduced a writing project called My Teacher’s Secret Adventures. I used the picture book My Teacher’s Secret Life (Krensky and Adinolfi) as a mentor text. I chose this picture book because the character strongly aligned with the personalities I saw in the class, kids who were full of curiosity, who asked probing questions to make sure they had the “real story” behind what was happening. This picture book also presented a story that provided an outline that was easily accessed by the burgeoning writers. The students spent most of their time writing argumentative text and practicing text-based responses. They had no formal experience writing narrative text. This book tells the story of a student who imagines what his teacher does after school hours. When he sees her skating with a strange man and a little girl he is shocked and swears there must be some mistake. My starting point for this project was asking Ms. Hopper what she might feel comfortable sharing with the students. I developed a list of “did you know” statements that alluded to moments in her life. After reading these statements, students asked questions, looked at pictures, or engaged in discussions that evidenced a growing connection to their newly revealed teacher. The kids learned about her failed driving test attempts as well as her college professors who told her she should never become a teacher. She told them about her bratty older brother and the pain of not being able to really read until fourth grade. What was truly interesting was the way the students reacted to her stories, comforting her with their own memories of not being quite good enough. There was a growing sense of community that indicated they were all in this together. Many children attended the same church as Ms. Hopper, and when she explained how she “gave her life to Christ” at seven years old, the students nodded in agreement and shared their own stories of faith, just as they shared their stories of bratty siblings and moments of naughtiness.

What resulted from the interviews were stories based on the text of Ms. Hopper’s life. To ensure these stories were “text-based,” students first chose three of their favorite responses. They decided which worked best for a beginning, middle, and end scene. Before they wrote, they illustrated the moment and brainstormed words that would help tell their story. The storyboards served as outlined inspiration for the stories. The students then wrote about their teacher’s secret adventures with insight, compassion, and humor. The writing was analyzed through the practice of thematic analysis, which serves as an inductive method of finding patterns
in text (Ezzy). This method is appropriate for this study because it places student work at the center of analysis rather than predetermined codes. The first step of thematic analysis is open coding. The researcher creates categories based on the patterns evident in the text. These patterns can be found in words, sentences, phrases, or entire sections. The text itself guides the analysis of similarities in content. The first theme questioned how the students saw their teacher. This category was essential because I wanted to see if the students might begin to perceive Ms. Hopper as someone more than just their teacher. What resulted were responses that ranged from silly to insightful that did evidence a growing view of who their teacher might “really” be. The first group of responses characterized her as someone with whom the students might identify. She took on features more representative of the students themselves as they interacted in a way unlike that which was typical to Ms. Hopper’s classroom structure.

I yelled “hey Ms. Hopper.” She look at me and said “peace dude rock out,” I said wow she is a cool teacher.

She chases the kids and gets their candy so she can give it to her class. Then we are all happy and drink soda and laugh.

I could never imagine she would look so great in a cheerleader uniform. She was a natural.

The next group of responses included descriptions of her characteristics that the students admired. Here are several examples from that group.

My teacher is rich. She has a pool and a game room.
She was on the cheerleader hall of fame.
But in the end she is a mom with two kids.

The final group of responses evidenced a respectful acknowledgment of her accomplishments. The students wrote about what they learned and how they too might overcome their own difficulties.

She may be a teacher but she struggled how to learn to read in first grade and now she is an English teacher even for GT. When I heard that I thought nothing is impossible.

I later found out that with hard work and effort she went through collage and graduated with a degree in English and now she is my teacher.

The next thematic category included responses that showed a growing connection that reached beyond the classroom. The writing showed connection, empathy, and even comfort.

I said not to feel bad about parallel parking. I said nobody can parallel park.
I know how you feel. My brother says mean things about me too.
I am proud of her because her life was not easy like my life isn’t so easy too.
Huh I’ve never know that she struggled reading during the first grade because I have always imagined her on the honor roll. Maybe that means I can be on the honor roll too.
I heard her crying because her brother was so mean and I wanted to let him know what a great person she is and I wanted to let her know I was sure she wasn’t adopted.
I was in the shoes of her college teacher and I told her she wasn’t going to make it but she proved me wrong and a couple of years later she came back home a successful teacher.

The final thematic category details her role as a component of the community as she exists outside of the classroom. To build the understanding that part of her importance is the fact that she contributes to life both in and outside of the classroom, students had to see her as a community member. My intention was to set into place the idea that in a community, we see people in the stores, at the games, and in church, and that is important. That in itself creates social capital and initiates a feeling of stewardship.
Students needed to understand that Ms. Hopper's life was defined by her place and her community.

She throws parties because she loves where she lives. She says having a good life is worth celebrating.

Me and Ms. Hopper saw each other at the Food Lion and I felt good because she smiled at me.

One night at a football game I was watching the cheerleaders cheering and I saw one cheerleader that I knew. I was like I couldn't believe it but she was really good!

She was sitting on her yard and she looked like a beautiful queen.

I saw a picture of Mrs. Hopper when she was a little and guess what it was a picture of her playing on the same field that RMS is built on and I said that is cool because you are teaching here where you used to play.

Overall, their work showed a closeness, connection, and a new understanding of their teacher. That was expected. However, what was not expected was the connection to the community revealed through their biographical introductions. In this section of the work, they wrote of all that they did in their community and showed that there were activities to value and that those values were indeed helping define their identities. (A. represents the name of their town.)

I live in A. my whole life with my grandma. I think I can take care of her here.

I have hit four homeruns in my life, killed 2 deer and caught a lot of fish.

I live in A. where I can hunt and fish for a hobby. I like to sing and dance and I like to perform at the fair.

I love swimming and sailing and one day I will live in a big house right here in A.

I like hunting and fishing that's why A. is a good place for me to live.

When I was in the fifth grade I won the annual A. writing prize so everyone knows what a good writer I am.

I live in A. and it is a much better place than where I used to live. I can hunt, fish, and run here.

Analyzing pieces of the students' writing tells only part of the story. When reading the stories from the start to finish, what I saw were tributes to a teacher who served as a strong mentor for bright kids, trying to correlate their context to their identity. The following is a complete section from one of the stories.

Well believe it or not, I peered in a college classroom. There was my teacher. I could tell she was very sad and it seemed like she had given up. I listened through the glass and her professor was telling her to give up. I found this suspicious. When I checked him out, I found out that he was really a criminal against the children of America having higher educations! If he's a criminal you know what that means? Mrs. Hopper is a super hero and she will always be known as my super teacher.

Final Thoughts

Moments of brilliance are all around us. They happen at twilight with frogs jumping over your toes and in classrooms where a child can look to his teacher as someone more than just the person who “grades” them. The texts of our lives can inspire students to become agents of change as they begin to embrace that which they have. Social capital implies depth, beauty, and importance. As well, power and a sense of self are inherent in its practice. But if students do not have an understanding of their capital, there is no power, no self, and ultimately no change. This study is just a start. It describes an idea of how with no other resources than our own stories, we can instill in students a sense of importance regarding their lives. We need to invest in the students while providing stories upon which they can build their self-perceptions as they prepare to be the designers of their future communities. This begins with understanding our own stories. As teachers we can create these cultural texts by unpacking our journeys and sharing our experiences with students. We can do this through writing, speaking, and sharing our stories with students. This begins the significant conversations that might ultimately influence the life choices of students.

Our rural communities need the voices of all those who stay and those who leave to speak on their behalf. They need their children to look at the main streets, crumbling away with foreclosure signs, and see potential. They need their children to invest themselves in the future of their hometowns because they value the role those towns played in their own development and identity. A small step toward that investment and transformative mindset...
is to question the texts that may serve as inspiration, preparation, and stimulation for both the student and the future of their communities.

**Works Cited**


O’Flahavan, John, and Judy Wallis. “Rosenblatt in the Classroom: Her Texts, Our Reading, Our Classrooms.” *Voices from the Middle*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2005, pp. 32–33.


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**READWRITETHINK CONNECTION**

Students thrive in an environment where they are active participants in their learning. In this activity, students listen to *My Teacher's Secret Life*, discuss the content, and make predictions about what the teacher and their peers do when they are away from school. After charting both student and teacher activities, the teacher models writing a book of his or her life outside school. Working on their own, students draw glimpses of their personal lives on a planning sheet and use it in the class to create presentations about their lives that they then share with their classmates. http://bit.ly/2998JH9