“Did you like living in a trailer? Why or why not?”: Discourse and the third space in a rural pen pal exchange

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Abstract

This study describes efforts in a U.S. teacher education program to raise the teacher candidates’ awareness of how place impacts schooling. The preservice teachers and second graders exchanged pen pal letters based on books set in contemporary rural America. The teacher candidates enacted four major discourses in the correspondence: personal, rural, global and traditional. Without connections to the children personally, as fellow rural residents or as participants in a conversation about rural life, the preservice teachers were left only to communicate through traditional and globalized discourses.

1. Introduction

Government officials and scholars have taken up the problems of preparation and retention of rural teachers around the world from a variety of positions (Barley, 2009; Lock, 2008; Millkeen, 2005; Vegas, 2007). Often their intention is to ensure that teachers will pursue the national policy agenda. Our study takes up the issue of preparation among teachers who have self-identified as future rural teachers within a particular rural region in the United States. We understand their choice to be a commitment to place. National agendas to prepare students to succeed in a global economy often separate school participants from this commitment (e.g., Tikly, 2001). As demonstrated in many places around the world, students “learn to leave” their communities while attending schools (Blessing, 2005; Corbett, 2007; Jimerson, 2005; Lou, 2009).

Rather than learning to build sustainable local communities through the curriculum, students and graduates recognise different opportunities await them away from home. Families struggle with these outcomes, hoping to keep their children close to home (Edmondson, 2003) and wishing for their children to be successful (Kong, 2009). Since teacher educators in many places around the world learn in different ways, rural teacher education is complex terrain within the practices of globalisation (Eversole, 2001). We hoped to help our students notice some of that complexity. We invited direct communication between prospective rural teachers and young experts on rural life with the intent of troubling the “learning to leave” agenda embedded within the national plans for rural schools in the United States before these teachers entered their rural classrooms.

2. The study

2.1. Purpose and participants

The goals for this action research project (Lewin, 1946) were straightforward. First, we wanted to provide the teacher education students with opportunities to sample rural students’ representations of their place-based identities and literacies. Second, we wanted the preservice teachers to reflect on how their own place-based identities will impact their teaching and the literacy development of their students. We imagined that rural spaces and values would bond these groups, enabling the preservice teachers to consider the roles of place in their developing teacher identities (Gruenewald, 2003). This was the students’ first opportunity to
think critically about rural schools and communities from their new position as teacher.

The young age of the children was considered an asset to the study. The existing body of work on place-conscious literacy practices heavily favors studies completed with older children. We believed that struggling readers as young as seven years old would be quite capable of engaging in the kinds of talk encouraged in the study. Most of the children produced an abundance of text and were competent and earnest thinkers about the topic at hand. They welcomed the opportunity to write and receive letters from the preservice teachers where they had the opportunity to be positioned as experts.

The preservice teacher education students were undergraduates enrolled in an introductory language and literacy methods course taught by the first author. The students were newly admitted to the elementary education major at the university, enrolled in their first language and literacy course. Nearly all are local residents who wish to teach permanently in the local area; two or three students were unsure at the time the study took place. More than 10 of the 15 teachers who participated in this study reside in the outlying school districts and commute to campus for classes. The area offers a range of typical blue-collar employment opportunities and family farms are common. Based on class conversations, only two or three of the teacher candidates identified as urban. A few were unsure or unwilling to label themselves as either urban or rural, but most identified as rural. The student population in this teacher preparation program is quite homogenous, comprised mostly of white females. Of the fifteen students enrolled the semester the pen pal exchange took place, two were men. The small size of the group allowed for extensive and personal faculty–student interactions, enabling an unusually close faculty–student relationship.

The starting point for both groups: reading, writing, and talking about what it means to be rural was intended to be a small first step in attending to place in the college classroom and the elementary classroom. We wanted to remain open to what both groups could teach us and thus opted to do more listening than talking. Before beginning, the preservice teachers’ instructor introduced some basic ideas about place-consciousness in the elementary classroom. The children’s teacher talked briefly with them about the word “rural” as not having a fixed or official meaning. Otherwise, the project proceeded in the same manner for both groups. The books were introduced with the question what does it mean to be rural? with the intent that the groups would read the world in the Freirean, critical tradition. Both groups engaged in spontaneous discussion after each book was read aloud and during letter writing and reading. The college instructor valued the ability of the participants to discuss the letters with little “official” participation on her part.

2.2. The exchange

The pairs exchanged three letters over the course of one semester. A read aloud preceded each group’s letter writing, with the books serving three particular purposes: 1) to prompt conversation about the rural themes in the children’s books (Austin, 2002), 2) to support the students’ development as teachers (Moore, 2000) and 3) to prompt the preservice teachers to identify untapped strengths in the children’s literacy development (Stanford & Sider, 2002). After hearing the first book read aloud, the children initiated the exchange by writing letters introducing themselves and commenting on the books with reference to their lives. After hearing the same book, the teacher candidates responded individually in kind to their partner’s letter. The same process continued for the three books. The project concluded with a celebratory luncheon where the children shared one final letter with their adult pen pals.

We selected The Little House by Virginia Lee Burton (1942), Junk Pile by Lady Burton (1997) and The Relatives Came by Cynthia Rylant (1999) because they offered clear rural themes to provoke commentary and discussion between pen pals.

The Relatives Came takes readers to an extended family gathering in the Appalachian region of the eastern United States, featuring family, distance and self-reliance as themes within a non-farming rural setting. The poignancy of the family’s reunion is the result, at least in part, of the physical distance between them.

Junk Pile (Borton, 1997) was the second text and it prompted discussions, heated at times, about stereotypes of rural people concerning expertise, aesthetics and dialect. This story, too, is set in contemporary Appalachia, tells the story of a girl who is called “Junk Pile” by her economically better-off schoolmates (such as Robert Haines) because of rusted auto parts and broken down vehicles in her yard. Burton uses the main character, Jamie Kay, to reposition rural knowledge and skills as necessary contributions even to the lives of those like Robert who live in “the big house on the ridge” (1997, np). The book offers a useful counterpoint to the perception of rural communities as homogenous. While Burton’s characters reinforce ideas about the stereotypical poor, white rural American, at the same time she reminds readers that divisions exist within rural communities as well. The text makes a variety of statements about rural life, any one of which had the potential to spark a third space opportunity to consider rural life.

The Little House (Burton, 1942) addresses the themes of space, development and nature. The story chronicles the life of an anthropomorphised country house that is gradually swallowed by urban sprawl, and then is eventually transplanted back to a rural setting. Like the teacher candidates, the little house experiences the push and pull between the conflicting discourses of outmigration and rooted familiarity. While Burton portrays rural life as appealing both for the Little House and the rural residents, still, the children learn to leave: they “grew up and went away to the city” (p. 12). Burton skillfully questions progress and development, challenging dominant discourses of what constitutes a better life, but does so without sentimentality.

2.3. “Glocalised” teacher education

Many of our teacher education students are deeply attached to place, community, and family. They tell us that they pick our teacher education program because it enables them to essentially replicate their childhood: modeling their teaching after their own teachers, living and teaching at least in the same communities, if not school buildings, of their childhood. They hope to become important participants in the maintenance of local ways. They envision that their adult lives will be rooted in the familiar — close to family and lifelong friends. We understand these attachments as primary, powerful discourses that are not necessarily romantic, traditional or reactionary because we do not privilege any and all change as necessarily “realistic,” “development,” or “progress” (Berry, 1990). Rather, we understand these local discourses as having the potential to be connected to issues of power in which decisions that affect lives are kept as close to ‘home’ as possible (Panelli, Punch, & Robson, 2007).

Through media, travel, and associations, our preservice teachers encounter and acquire other discourses as well as these local ones. Even their act of enrolling in college is indicative of these discourses. Although most of the students in the program will be first generation college graduates, they recognise college as the means to extend their knowledge beyond what they have acquired locally and to be acknowledged as someone who has acquired many worldly discourses. For many, attending college is an expression of a desire for a professional life more fulfilling and financially rewarding than
their parents’. The beginning teacher preparation coursework is an important first step toward realizing that desire. The students embrace the specialised knowledge that will make them valued contributors to their community, but at the same time they acknowledge that these new discourses set them apart from some others in their local communities.

Once they begin their teacher education coursework, they develop a teacher’s perspective influenced by federal, state and local policies. In their courses and from the popular press, they hear discourses that tell them that they should be “learning to leave” (Corbett, 2007) their communities and that teaching others to leave will be their role as a certified teacher. In fact, they learn that their value as teachers will be calculated according to number of their students who score above state designated targets on annual examinations in reading, mathematics and science set according to world-class standards (Gamoran, 2007). These U.S. policies define teaching, learning, and success as participation in globalisation that will lead to both individual and national economic prosperity (Marshall & Tucker, 1993). Globalized teaching discourses that define teaching in this way are becoming increasingly common both in industrialized and developing countries (Weber, 2007).

These new discourses compete with their local discourses, complicating their efforts to construct their identities as teachers. The teacher candidates want only to do what is best for their future students, but are unsure how ‘best’ is to be defined. We share this ambiguity and recognise that a complete repudiation of globalized teacher discourses would very likely preclude our students’ possibilities for employment in public schools. Yet we worry about the unequal power of these discourses within teacher education, testing, and certification. Our goal was to resist the erasure of the local in teacher education by connecting the rural discourses shared by the teacher candidates and the children. We used children’s books and letter exchanges to do this, organizing the project around rural themes. This, we felt, would mediate the interaction of primary and secondary discourses, creating a third space learning opportunity in which the teacher education students and the second graders could see and explore the “glocal.” The success of the project depended on the letter writers’ engagement in the third space.

2.4. Third space theory

A third space is a social context for learning at the intersection of formal and informal, official and unofficial ‘scripts’ (Gutiérrez, 1995 cited in Gutiérrez, 2008). Gutiérrez explains that within the third space, “everyday concepts” are reorganised into curriculum that impacts “everyday functioning” in the third space (p. 152). Learning in the third space depends on authentic social interactions, redefining what counts as knowledge and attending to everyday learning (Gutiérrez, 2008). In order to create a third space, we based our project on an authentic literacy practice centered on rural themes and sought to level the power relationships between teachers and students. Both sets of learners would develop in this dialogic relationship, we imagined, shaping the learning environment itself over time (Gutiérrez, 2008). Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, and Ellis (2004) argue that in projects such as ours, “first space,” more dominant discourses, that may include home, community, and social discourses, merge with “second space,” less dominant institutionalized discourses of school and church.

Within the third space, we anticipated that the literature would prompt reflection and discussion wherein students could access their first space discourses not typically valued in the second space of schools, making the boundaries between out-of-school and in-school literacies both visible and permeable. Out-of-school discourses would be foregrounded. The children would use the literature to make their “everyday” knowledge and discourses relevant in a different type of curriculum (Theobald & Curtiss, 2000). Students’ book related writing and discussions would revise the official scripts of school classrooms and their pen pal teachers would reconsider the relevance and complexity of the students’ understandings and literacies (Brooks, 2003). As is typical in third space interactions, both the learners and their classroom environments would develop with children’s books and letter writing serving as tools for its construction. The result might have been an authentic space within which children and teacher candidates could have discussed difference, but our conjectures about how third space learning might occur did not materialize.

2.5. Data analysis

The primary data in the study were the contents of 3 sets of letters exchanged between the 15 rural second grade students struggling with learning to read and write at school and 15 preservice teacher candidates enrolled in their first block of teaching methods classes in a teacher education program that prepares many of its teachers for rural schools. We anticipated that pen pal letters written around the rural themes within three children’s books would spark a third space exchange in which the generic structure of letters would level typical teacher/student power hierarchies and permit both correspondents to lead and follow when appropriate in discussions of what it means to be rural. Initial analysis of the letters were organized according to those assumptions as we asked questions about the letter contents and styles: how the books’ rural themes were taken up and explored; how students and candidates negotiated the episodic relationships, and the turn taking practices that were used. In addition, we separated the letter dyads in order to look at patterns among teachers and students. Based on the preliminary conclusions around those analyses, we reread the letters again in dyads, and then, separated them into themed groups. Next, we added a new question to our analysis based loosely on critical discourse analysis practices (Gee, 1999) about the social discourses that seemed to direct the content, style and structures of the letters between students and candidates. Table 1 provides overview of these questions as linked to the correspondence from both groups.

3. Results

3.1. Students as pen pals

The students stepped into the third space, demonstrating command of letter write genre and etiquette, engagement, expertise, and literacy analysis. For example, after reading The Relatives Came (Rylant, 1999) the children wrote the first letters, quickly demonstrating their competency with the genre and interest in the topics. Their letters demonstrate a sophisticated combination of attention to the first letter etiquette of a pen pal exchange along with invitations to discuss the rural themes in the book:

Dear Pen Pal,

My name is Barry. I like the book. It was funny. My relatives do not visit. I don’t live in a farm I live in the conchery. And they live clost. I went to new york. I lived in California. I live in _______. I had a spacer. I have a cupe.

your frined

Barry

The children consistently provided the requisite personal information such as their name and age, offered interesting information about themselves and their families (often related to the book), and also signaled their engagement with the rural themes in the books.
According to their teacher, this was a first for these seven and eight year old struggling readers and writers. Their more typical literacy work rarely prompted them to think about how their lives outside of school connected to their in-school activities. Consider Amy. Before the project, Amy’s purpose for writing was to fill the page in order to make her writing look like that of the more fluent writers she knew. Compare her regular class writing with one letter to her preservice teacher pal. Both consider the same topics. 

[regular in-class sample]

I have a cat. Her name is Prue. and she is 5 years old. I love her very very very very much. My mom loves her very very very very much. My dad loves her very very very very much. Nan and pap love her very very very very much. I love nan and pap very very very very much.

[pen pal letter sample]

Dear Joy and Ann

Do you have a cat? My cats name is Prue and she is black. My nan and paps Dog is drones and my nan and paps Dog name is Durck and his tail hers so mach and my nans and paps Dogs hit me in the mous on my teeth. If my hous could see it will see my grams hous and my nans hous. Have you bin to a city at all. I never ben to a city.

Are you going fishing becuals I am going fishing with my dad. Would you like to live in the city or conntry.

Your Friend

Amy

We noticed a shift in the children’s attitudes during the pen pal project that reflected their new role as content expert. While they composed, the student—teacher talk did not center on the form their letters should take, but rather on the ideas they were communicating. The social function of writing, not the mechanics of delivery, became the focus of their writing. As evidenced by the children’s mastery of the pen pal genre and their desire to produce messages that would be both decipherable and meaningful to their college-aged pen pals, form followed function for these writers. The letters written by the adults were models of craft and skills and the children emulated their pen pals’ more practiced writing. The children demonstrated the same positive response to this modeling (Cambourne, 1988) as noted in other preservice teacher/child pen pal research (see Crowhurst, 1990; Jenkins & Earle, 1999; Moore & Seeger, 2009).

The students also became more articulate about the book themes, connecting their lives to the characters in the texts. Consider Hope’s development from the statement “I like this book” without justification, to her list of disadvantages to city living “It would be very noisy in the city. There would be a lot of traffic. I would live in the country. It is nice and quiet.” Asking students to consider their identities through the books and letters changed both what it meant for them to be literate and how they could relate to teachers.

Ultimately, the second graders used the themes to seek new friends. While they offered comments on the books and themes, they peppered their letters with questions and stories about pets, family members, recreation, embarrassing movements, bare feet, California, and even poop. Each question was preceded by a personal reference to their lives in the hopes of swapping stories, or maybe even, sharing secrets. Each second grade student offered such intimacy at some point in their letter writing, suggesting that the project had invited them to work in a third space. The children tried to pull the teachers toward their understandings of their place. Some preservice teachers accepted, while others did not.

### 3.2. Preservice teachers as pen pals

Initially, the preservice teachers followed the textual rules governing the pen pal letter genre, adhering closely to the respond/share/question cycle of the pen pal format. The preservice teachers were eager to exchange letters with second grade students. They met each package of letters from the school with excitement because those letters represented “real teacher work” and they enjoyed reading the children’s insights about the books and their lives. At first, they worried about the correctness of their responses. They frequently asked questions indicating their concern about whether they were using appropriate levels of difficulty in terms of words, handwriting, sentence complexity and topics. This anxiety seemed reasonable since this was their first official act with students after being admitted to the elementary education major and in this age of digital communication, few were particularly practiced as letter writers. At times, the children’s spelling and syntax presented challenges for the teacher candidates’ (and our) deciphering abilities and to their emerging thoughts about what it means to teach reading and writing. All these factors led to productive conversations among their peers in the classroom. Their uncertainty about their position in the project — rural inhabitant, college student, and preservice teacher — is apparent in most of their responses. While we argue that the teacher candidates made particular decisions about how to interact with the children, their uncertainty is also noticeable.

Dear Jon,

Hi my name is Katie. I also liked this book. It makes me think of the times when my relatives came to visit. Just because I live in the country, everyone thinks I live on a farm. But I do not. What was your favorite part of The Relatives Came? My favorite part was when the car smashes into the fence. What do you do when your family visits you? Are they from the country also?

Your Friend,

Katie

While cordial, Katie seems to keep her distance from Jon. She mimics his style and content, affirming him as a writer and
extending his topics only slightly. She attempts to gain solidarity with Jon and legitimacy as a rural inhabitant. Both are from the country and neither are farmers. However, she offers little of herself that Jon did not indicate first, and she begins quickly to ask Jon questions. Note that Katie establishes control and authority over the correspondence, directing not only the topic of interchange, but also the form his letter should take (Johnston, 2004). Jon took this cue from Katie and spent most of his second and third letters addressing the nine questions that Katie posed to him. He asked Katie just one question: “Do you have a cat?”

We did not anticipate this sharp transition from acknowledgement to control, but recognised these patterns in nearly all of the pairs of pen pals. Preservice teachers acknowledged their pen pal’s topics, and began to direct questions toward their pen pal without revealing much of themselves or extending the second graders’ ideas. The teacher candidates used questions to take over the exchanges, returning them to a more traditional teacher/student relationship wherein the adult directs the topic of the exchanges. Only four preservice teachers spent more space in their letters acknowledging the topics of their pen pals offered than asking questions. Eleven chose to use at least twice as much space to ask questions as they allotted to acknowledging the topics their pen pals offered. Matt was the only second grader who made the same choice.

Dear Ashley
I am doing fine are you? We read Junk Pile. I didn’t have Eney favorit part in The relatives came. If you see the story Junk pile It is a funny story. Aar you having fun at college? One time I got Tese from my borher Aany. He gives me Wegeys. Well I tell My mom and call my Bother names. Do You have eney Pets? Do you like the book Junk pile? Your friend Matt

Ashley responded to Matt’s four questions and offered four questions for Matt to answer in his next letter. Matt was the only second grade student who ignored his pen pals’ questions, replying to only two of Ashley’s eleven questions. She acknowledged all of Matt’s ten questions. Matt’s and Ashley’s exchange is unique because Matt seemed to take the third space seriously by exploring his interests in Ashley’s life and opinions.

The remaining fourteen second graders settled into a routine, devoting most of their letters to responding to their pen pals’ questions (ranging from 6 to 15 across three letters). When we look closely at the types of questions preservice teachers asked, we noted that teachers appeared to use the questions for more than to get to know their pals. Consider this exchange.

Dear Erin,
Yes I did live in california. It is really fun. I live near a beaches. I never vist them. California is way different than here.

The grass in california is higher.
Dear Nathan,
It is nice to hear from you again. I am sorry to hear that you will not be able to play at the junk yard anymore. Maybe you will make new friends to play with when people move into the new houses. Do you think you will find a new place to play?

It was not very nice that your neighbor was calling you names. Yes, I have been picked on tons of times. I just try not to let it bother me.

Your Friend,
Joan

Joan seems to minimise Nathan’s losses. She reframes his resistance to “progress,” insisting that the housing development will ultimately lead to a better, less isolated, less rural life. We find this interesting given that Joan herself identifies as a rural resident and wonder if this reflects her own ambivalence about rural life. She posed a question that invites Nathan to adopt her perspective about development. “Do you think you will find a new place to play?” Even though development is the central topic of The Little House, Nathan did not mention his “pane in the butte” (housing development) again in any of his subsequent letters to Joan.

In a third example of the preservice teachers’ use of questions, Carrie and Jake corresponded about The Little House (Burton, 1942). Jake, like the other children, adopt Burton’s technique and tell his pen pal what his house could see. Carrie either does not notice this or chooses not to follow Jake’s lead.

4/19/07
Dear Carrie,
I live in coutry. I Live in a moble home. I don’t have brothers or sister. I like riding best. If my home could see, It would see daiseyes, rodes, houses, I think It would suc there would be no room to play. I would like to live in coutry I coutry quiet.
Your friend,
Jake

4/25/07
Dear Jake,
I bet the daisy’s at your house are beautiful. I love flowers and have many planted at my house. It sounds like you really like playing outside. What are your favorite things to play? My daughter and I love to ride bicycles together. If you lived in the country, what would you most like to have? What do you like to ride? What is your favorite thing to do in the summer? My favorite thing to do in the summer is swim. I hope to hear from you soon.
Your friend,
Carrie

Carrie ignored Jake’s comments on The Little House themes in order to describe her experiences and interests. Jake dismissed the notion that city life could be interesting because it lacks open space and connection to nature. Carrie acknowledges Jake’s daisies without recognising their significance in Jake’s remarks. She shares a personal detail about her family, but follows with a question that seems to make little sense — “if you lived in the country” — after Jake declared the location of his home and his desire to stay there. These writers do not connect. Carrie’s offering of personal details demonstrates her willingness to connect with Jake, but in failing to recognise and extend his contribution to the conversation, her offering seems arbitrary. Carrie’s questions at the end float away from Jake’s interests in the book themes toward her thoughts of summer (and perhaps the end of the semester).

4. Discussion: what happened?

The preservice teachers’ struggle in the pen pal project is apparent. They did not slide easily into the role of pal within the third space. They juggled, sometimes clumsily, at least four discourses simultaneously — personal, rural, global, and teacher. While we assumed that the personal and the rural discourses would be well rehearsed within their communication repertoires, we placed those familiar discourses within a project that featured the less familiar discourses of globalisation and teaching.

Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of heteroglossia helps us to understand the preservice teachers’ letters to their pen pals. Heteroglossia describes the existence of multiple discourses, even contradictory ones, within a single language, enabling speakers and writers to express the distinct points of view of each discourse within the same utterance or passage. In Bakhtin’s terms, the preservice teachers used hybrid utterances in their remarks to the second grade students, expressing themselves through at least these four discourses simultaneously. Within this context, they engaged in the act of becoming teachers and in the process, attempted to assimilate the words of others with their own in order to participate and make sense of the experience. The text of their letters, then, can help us understand how to support them in their paths to becoming teachers as well as how to encourage the glocal in teacher education.

All of the preservice teachers were cordial in their letters. However, neither “friend” nor “mate” was the predominant discourse through which they communicated most frequently. They were cordial and responsive with their pals and most frequently acknowledged students’ questions or statements. Less frequently, the preservice teachers offered information from their lives that were not prompted in their pals’ letters. Brodkey (1992) experienced this reluctance as well when her graduate students, engaged in a correspondence with learners in an adult basic education program, would not discuss the more friendly and intimate language of their correspondents. Brodkey argued class differences about public and private matters limited personal possibilities among the correspondents in her study. We felt this same tension around the theme of difference in Junk Pile, even though we thought we had circumvented the cultural mismatch between the correspondents by pairing rural preservice teachers with rural children from the same local communities. The second graders were most forthcoming and articulate about their ridicule and violent disagreements with others (“the only time I bin made front of from teen agers when I brock open my head”) and wondered if the preservice teachers shared their experiences. Although some did admit to such differences briefly, all moved quickly on to statements that seemed to diminish the importance of such events (“I have been picked on tons of times. I just try not to let it bother me”). In this way, there appeared to be a lack of compassion within the preservice teachers’ personal discourse. We interpret this not to mean that the teacher candidates lacked compassion for the children, but rather that the discourses they chose did not permit the kind of personal connection initiated by the children.

We expected that shared rural discourses would be the primary connection between the preservice teachers and the second graders. In the introductory letters, all participants used their residence or previous residences to establish their legitimacy to comment of the rural themes in the children’s books and to claim some form of solidarity with rural life and their pen pals. We believe that the preservice teachers’ declarations in the first letters established the foundation for the second graders’ willingness to share their knowledge about the themes and to tie them carefully to their lives (“I live by a jok yard lik the girl in the book, the cars are in a form flid”). Both groups of correspondents were members of the
same rural discourse, but we still noticed a disconnect between the pen pals that a shared rural discourse could not overcome.

The differences represented in the themes were also apparent in the preservice teachers' discussions and letters. For example, junk in yards, trailers, absence of friends, and even home-style haircuts were contested. Although this demonstrated the heterogeneity with rural communities, the tenor of the talk in the discussions and the tone in the letters silenced some participants in ways there were troubling (Recall Nathan’s “pane in the butte.”). Several preservice teachers who live or had lived in trailers became silent during the campus discussion of Junk Pile.

Preservice teachers encouraged the second graders to think globally. “Have you ever been to the city? I have been to New York City a few times, and I liked it a lot” (Katie). “There seems to never be anything to do in the country” (Scott). “Have you ever been in the city? It can be a little bit scary because it is so big, but you get used to it. There are a lot of people around and you can be closer to your friends” (Maggie). More than an acknowledgement of Burton’s flirtation with city living in The Little House, preservice teachers promoted city living, helping the students to “learn to leave” (Corbett, 2007). Like the little house, most of the preservice teachers confirmed some commitment to local life, but promoted connections to the larger world of cities and beyond. When rural interactions occurred in the preservice teachers’ letters, we interpreted it as approximations (Cambourne, 1988) of standard spelling, syntax, and genre in their letters. Bolstered by course content, the preservice teachers demonstrated their emerging abilities to handle the second grade students’ efforts to communicate through the letters. The class conversations were fruitful because of the preservice teachers’ recognition of the sincerity of students’ effort and their own genuine interest in corresponding with actual elementary school students. Working within the third space, however, proved challenging to preservice teachers’ emerging discourse on teaching.

Most balked at the notion that students could be experts on the themes or their lives (Novinger, 2003), and they struggled with the ambiguity of whether or not they were “doing it” correctly (Britzman, 2003). The preservice teachers expressed these uncertainties verbally in class, but in their letters they often attempted to direct the topics students would consider in subsequent letters through a barrage of questions. At times, these questions disparaged aspects of rural living, disciplined the students on which topics were appropriate for discussion in the letters, and moved away from the rural themes. Because the course readings and our framing of the project emphasized teacher discourses that advocated shared authority and the importance of student voices, we assume that the voices of teacher control were adapted from their past experiences or popular culture representations of teaching. Regardless of its origin, this enactment of the discourses of traditional teaching had the effect of impeding third space interactions.

In the process of becoming teachers through this pen pal project, the preservice teachers displayed hybrid speech acts in their efforts to coordinate personal, rural, global, and teacher discourses simultaneously. Although the second grade students moved flexibility between the personal and rural discourses, the addition of the global and teacher discourses seemed to disrupt the preservice teachers’ abilities to recognize and develop the richness of the students’ efforts. For example, when the children shared emotional details concerning their lives and disagreements, the teacher discourses seemed to drown out the personal discourse in the preservice teachers’ responses. This choice of register resulted in a tone that seemed dismissive. The global voices complicated the rural voices within the preservice teachers’ letters in ways that at times seemed to reject rural life. The silencing and complications always worked to diminish the role of place in the students’ narration of their lives through the book themes. The smaller role for place reduced the importance of students as authorities and literate correspondents in the project and the negotiation of rural life. Without being tied to place, by default students learning must be in service of the global.

4.1. Third space connections & passes

In designing this experience, we expected the children would use this third space opportunity to lead the exchanges through their emerging expertise on their rural lives (Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2007). While there were times that pairs did enter into third space interactions, such as in Matt and Ashley’s exchange about Junk Pile, the preservice teachers’ uncertainties about how to relate to the children precluded more consistent third space connections. The teacher candidates started the exchanges equitably, but enacted globalization and traditional teaching discourses incompatible with third space interactions. The third space expectation was incompatible with their chosen discourses which had the effect of barring entry into a third space wherein difference could be interrogated. Connecting with children based on their writing about their homes, lives, and selves, conflicted with the preservice teachers’ own school experiences and their ideas about proper teacher/student talk. Their hybrid utterances reflect this conflict.

For both groups, we framed the project with the question What does it mean to be rural? For us, the defining of the term “rural” is useful only to the extent that we recognize that any definition of rural is wholly subjective and context-bound (Halfacree, 2004). Thus, a particular definition isn’t relevant here, but rural as a category of difference (Bell, 1992) is. The teacher candidates’ unwillingness to accept the children’s invitations to discuss the rural themes in the books along with their in-class reactions to Junk Pile suggest their ambivalence about rurality and their identification as rural citizens. Yet, overwhelmingly, they plan to stay and teach in the area. This makes the challenge to engage the preservice teachers in discussions of rurality as a category of difference even more pressing. We believe that the best way to encourage our students to reach across difference (of any kind) is to engage them in authentic learning experiences such as this one. Our first attempt affirms both the importance and the complexity of the task.

5. Conclusion

This project was based on assumptions that did not materialize. Most importantly, we were confident that both groups would connect personally and within the rural themes in the books. From there, we hoped to bridge what they learned about and from the children to concerns about rural sustainability and viability. A number of factors interfered with this plan.

The preservice teachers wanted to connect with the children personally, but seemed uncomfortable relating to the children outside of the traditional teacher/student relationship. We believe that the preservice teachers’ school biographies (Britzman, 2003) influenced this tendency to re-inact their own experiences with their teachers. While the children made clear and repeated attempts to connect personally with their adult pen pals, the teacher candidates’ efforts to connect with the children consisted mostly of asking questions. They did not seem to recognize the children’s expertise on the subject of their own lives (Novinger, 2003). The preservice teachers demonstrated interest in entering into the third space, but they resisted entering into a different teacher/student relationship.
They did not accept our invitation to relate to their pen pals outside of the traditional teacher relationship in part because they failed to connect personally, but also because of their ambivalence about the rural themes presented in the books. This was apparent both in their statements to the children about the rural themes such as distance, self-reliance, expertise, aesthetics, and development as well as in-class discussions. We speculate that had they been more convinced about the value of the making place relevant in curriculum, they would have been willing to connect what the children were sharing about their homes, lives, and selves with curriculum. They did not recognise the significance of the children’s stories about their rural lives both because they were not convinced of the relevance of place in curriculum and because they were unable or unwilling to enter into a third space.

This slight of the children’s efforts to make their lives and themselves relevant demonstrates a detachment from rural people and places (even though the students claim to be rural) and also makes unintended statements about the relevance of rural places and rural people. Without connections to the children personally, as fellow rural residents, or as participants in a conversation about rural life as constructed in the books, the preservice teachers are left only to communicate through traditional and globalized discourses. Within these frameworks, teaching is abstract, placeless, and transportable. This contradicts their commitments to local teaching. The local cannot be understood independently of the global, but neither should the global be understood without the local. How might teacher educators offer candidates new ideas about the relevance of place in curriculum and invite them to re-imagine the teacher/student relationship, while simultaneously challenging them to notice issues of rural sustainability and viability? How can we insert glocal into teacher education?

5.1. Plans for the future

Because we are committed to local communities and a model of schooling wherein place matters, we will try again. We will work on our own understanding of the discourses of teaching that impacted this experience: personal, rural, globalized, and traditional teaching. With our preservice teacher students, we must examine each position separately and with awareness of how they sometimes support and sometimes contradict the students’ plans to teach locally.

A pen pal experience with local students has good potential in helping students become more aware of the discourses of teaching. Its implementation, however, must be more strategic, offering more in-class support to the teacher candidates before expecting them to be more skilled not only in noticing the children’s invitations for discussion of personal and rural themes in the letters, but in understanding the relevance of children’s home, lives, and selves in the curriculum. Teacher candidates need explicit encouragement to connect personally with the students so the rural themes become more relevant. This will also provide opportunities for discussion about teaching for globalisation and traditional pedagogies, grounded in the concrete problem of composing the letters. These experiences could connect to discussions that develop the teachers’ background knowledge about economic globalisation, glocalisation, and discourse as they relate to their work as teachers.

To meet this goal, we have already acted on what was learned from this study. The first author has designed and taught a rural school immersion course for students intending to major in education. For two weeks, students intern in a small, rural school while living in the community. The course requires students to notice the impact of place on the curriculum and analyse the positioning of one small rural community in the larger world. This experience complicates the teacher candidates’ existing ideas about good teaching as standardized and context independent and a variety of competing definitions of success and globalisation become obvious during the experience. Like the letters and the books, the rural school and community are texts in which the students can trace the enactment of discourses such as personal, rural, global, and traditional teaching.

What we have learned supports our efforts in working toward the goal of resisting the erasure of the local in teacher education and inserting place into curriculum. This is an important goal that has received some (Green & Reid, 2004), but not enough attention in the professional literature on teacher preparation. We believe it is vital for preservice teachers to consider new perspectives about the relationship between teachers, students, communities and the world. Teacher education programs are where existing discourses must be interrupted, challenged, or resisted (Brodkey, 1992) in order to revise scripts that tell the candidates that these are separate entities. This is a global concern (Weber, 2007). We want to raise the awareness level of our students’ knowledge about how place impacts schooling, push our students to consider the implications of their responses to children, and connect teachers democratically to the community in which they teach. This can be accomplished only if we can help our preservice teachers understand the diversity of discourses that impact their work with children. The teacher candidates must do what the children did in their pen pal letters—supplement “old” discourses with new glocal discourses that re-center and reconnect people and places. We recognise the difficulty of this task. Our experience with this project shows the way in which geographic scale collapses; regions are tied to global in subtle and obvious ways (Weber, 2007). What it means to be rural is contextual, historical and global simultaneously. The development of global discourse is situational.

References


