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## Fighting the Good Fight: Overcoming Aspects of Rurality as an ELA Instructor

Lisa A. Blaney

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Rural schools, school funding, complexity of place, place-based education

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### Abstract

This article explores the multifaceted challenges of implementing culturally responsive curriculum in rural educational settings through the lens of a Multicultural Literature elective developed for a high school in rural New Jersey. Prompted by student inquiry into the absence of diverse course offerings, the author—a veteran educator—narrates the development and launch of a course designed to address this gap. Despite strong administrative and departmental support, low student enrollment exposed deeper systemic barriers. Drawing on scholarly frameworks including Complexity of Place (Coady, 2019), Place-Based Education (Gruenewald, 2003), and Social Emotional Learning (Schwartz & Skoog-Hoffman, 2021), this piece interrogates how geographic isolation, limited funding, and resistance to curricular change impede diversification efforts in rural ELA classrooms. Weaving personal narrative with current research, this article advocates for a reimagining of rurality in educational spaces and offers practical strategies for bridging the gap between community context and curricular innovation. This work contributes to ongoing discourse around equity, access, and culturally responsive pedagogy in under-resourced and geographically isolated school districts.

### Introduction

Ten students sit in a tightly knit workshop circle in a Creative Writing class located in rural New Jersey. They pose the following question: Why do we not have any diverse electives at the high school? I usually have an answer for my students, even if it is not the answer they want to hear,

but this question solicited a long silence as I legitimately could not think of one multicultural course offering in English Language Arts. As I make a quick list of all the elective courses offered, I too realize the deep need to diversify our core elective courses in the arts. The students then begin to express their desire for a Multicultural Literature course, which I agree is one small step in the right direction toward diversifying our course catalog.

I get right to work. I e-mail the administration and they are extremely supportive of this initiative as are my colleagues in the English Language Arts Department. The administration gives me the green light to write the course. For the first time, in a long time, I am feeling inspired, encouraged, even exhilarated as a veteran educator. I write a semester long elective entitled Multicultural Literature with a book club structure. I am sure that students will be knocking down my door to take this class. Then six students enrolled. Six.

Despite a supportive administration and encouraging colleagues, the course never took flight. In fact, it barely made it to the tarmac. Aspects of rurality, both seen and unseen, impact elements of education in ways ELA educators cannot even fathom. So, what exactly are these obstacles and how do ELA instructors overcome these barriers to reach all students in their classrooms in a more meaningful way?

### **Complexity of Place**

Complexity of place refers to the lack of proximity to services and schools which directly influences the ways in which families are physically present or not present within school environments (Coady, 2019). This distance, as well all other geographic elements, contribute to rurality in various ways and impact school culture as parents and students are emotionally and physically isolated (Coady, 2019). Complexity of place does have a bearing on how rural students learn and whether or not they are open to or opposed to culturally responsive content (Coady, et al., 2023). Individuals in rural areas, tend not to socialize or interact with others outside of the community due to the vast amount of wide-open land between residential areas. This lack of socialization can cause students to become more isolated and hesitant than non-rural students to explore new educational topics.

Human connection is critical for achieving action in social systems (Balsa-Barreiro et al., 2022). School districts are large social systems that rely on the actions of students, community members, and administration to thrive in accordance with state standards. Social behavior relies heavily on not only the underlying social system but also the context of the environment where said behaviors emerge (Balsa-Barreiro et al., 2022). Although the impact of complexity of place is not easily seen by students or administrators, it still silently impedes rural students from stepping out of their comfort zone and trying something new. Rural educators have to consider the geographical isolation that rural students experience as opposed to suburban and urban students. This isolation and complexity of place can impact their social skills and their range of social perspective making it extremely difficult to implement diversified ELA course offerings.

### **Insufficient Funding**

Research has shown time and time again that students from small districts are offered fewer educational opportunities than students in larger districts (Bouck, 2004). For example, in continuance with the previous example of New Jersey, only 5.9% of the state funding went to rural New Jersey districts in 2019 leaving these schools with insufficient resources over the last five years (Stanford, 2023). This is not an uncommon occurrence in rural schools across the nation. In 2014, 16 rural districts also known as “Bacon Districts” in a lawsuit filed by the Education Law Center, sued the Department of Education for more New Jersey state funding, as they felt the distribution was inequitable to rural students (Wood, 2023). The majority of the districts involved were located in southern New Jersey (Wood, 2023). The complaint claimed that rural schools were grossly underfunded compared to other districts across the state (Wood, 2023). The public-school advocacy organization, The Education Law Center, who filed the lawsuit demanded the appropriate funding required under the School Reform Act of 2008 (Wood, 2023). According to the complaint, the aid was cut in 2011 and has been at a standstill ever since leaving such Bacon districts “underfunded by approximately \$18 million and depriving an estimated 2,000 children of high-quality pre-schools” (Wood, 2023, para 5). This is only a glimpse into some of the environmental challenges that rural educators face when trying to implement culturally responsive ELA curriculum. Rural districts are often underfunded and forgotten compared to their suburban and urban counterparts.

When resources are scant, rural school districts are left with no choice but to reuse the same resources over and over again, leaving ELA curriculum stagnant and unable to evolve. This keeps ELA curriculum warped in time and rural students consistently unexposed to diverse literature. This in turn causes students to become leery of enrolling in diverse courses. To put into perspective how many small districts exist in a densely populated state such as New Jersey, let's compare the state to Florida. Florida currently has 67 (countywide) school districts serving its 3 million public school students, while New Jersey has around 600 districts for roughly only 1.3 million students (DiCarlo & Edmund, 2024). These vast extremes in national district fragmentation further display the complexity of place of rural districts in addition to diminished funding, which can make culturally responsive practices for ELA instructors even more difficult to successfully implement.

Larger districts also have increased funding which allows for more sustainability in diverse course offerings compared to smaller districts. Students who are not exposed to diversity, such as a proportionate number of rural students, need that exposure in educational settings to further their understanding of the world that exists beyond the four walls of the classroom. They must also be willing to enroll in culturally responsive electives on their own accord. The more diversity rural educators are exposed to in their own lives, the more willing they are to incorporate diversity into their instruction (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Garces-Bacsal, 2022). However, even though rural educators, such as myself, advocate for culturally responsive ELA practices and course offerings, the barriers of rurality present never ending challenges, as resistance to change is inevitable in these remote spaces. So, the question remains: how can rural ELA instructors possibly combat these insular forces that seem so far out of their control?

### **Redefining Rurality Inside of the Classroom**

ELA Educators must begin by redefining what rurality looks like in 2025 compared to decades prior. There is this notion that rural districts are bound by homogeneity and tied to land when in fact, fewer than 6% of rural Americans are employed in agriculture (Junod et al., 2020). Place-based education (PBE) is essential to begin the redefinition of rurality. PBE practices primarily focus on the environment of students and how that environment predetermines their perspective of the world around them (Gruenewald, 2003). Gruenewald (2003) argues that students can't be asked to change or comprehend the world around them if they do not understand the smaller world that they are currently living in.

Place Based Education views the community as its own classroom (Ark, 2020). The classroom and rural community should be interconnected so that students and faculty can redefine what rurality looks like in modern educational practices. When educating rural students, place-based education is essential to successfully diversifying ELA curriculum and goes hand in hand with culturally responsive practices. By helping students figure out how their environment both helps and hinders them, they will eventually be able to cultivate a love for all learning and embrace educational experiences that initially may have felt foreign to them.

### **Social Emotional Learning**

Rural districts are encouraged to embrace Social Emotional Learning (SEL) as a priority in their district goals to combat various barriers of rurality. SEL programs are designed to help students and educators better understand themselves as well as their social behavior (Schwartz & Skoog-Hoffman, 2021). While SEL programs can feel a little childish or hokey to high school students, if the concepts of SEL programs are combined with Place Based Educational strategies, educators and administrators can begin to truly redefine rurality while increasing diversified equitable educational experiences for all students. Oftentimes, educators view SEL lessons as "just one more thing" they have to accomplish in an already long laundry list of things to do. However, elements of SEL instruction such as helping students better understand themselves and relate to others can be woven into the fabric of Place Based lessons further battling elements of rurality that seem out of our control. Rural districts should keep a continuous improvement mindset when picking a SEL program that works for them and their specific district goals (Schwartz & Skoog-Hoffman, 2021).

### **Where Do We Go from Here?**

It is time for rural educators to take a step back and really aim to understand all facets of rural settings. ELA instructors and their advocacy of culturally responsive instruction are just small pieces of the complex puzzle that encompasses fighting the good fight against inadvertent aspects of rurality. While a supportive administration is wonderful, it is simply not enough to garner enough interest from students to want to diversify their education all on their own. Rural districts offer a wonderful tightknit community that can feel familial and safe, but there is an entire world waiting to be explored by rural students, if they are willing to push through certain environmental obstacles to get there.

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