The importance of place: A backyard researcher's journey of illuminating voice in a rural midwest community

STEPHANIE OUDGHIRI SCHERER

KEYWORDS

Rural, backyard research, critical pedagogy of place, Latinx

doi: 0.22488/okstate.25.100630

> These people are members of the community that care about where they live, so what I hear when I'm being yelled at is people caring loudly at me.
>
> —Leslie Knope

Is Your Community Like Parks and Rec?—Quite the Opposite

It is 8:05 a.m. and standing-room only. As I glance around the rectangular room, I recognize a few familiar faces and smile. I am glad I arrived early and grabbed a chair near the front. Clutching my coffee, I can feel my heart pounding in my ears. This is my first time attending the Shelton County Commissioners' meeting. The air is tense as folks speak in low whispers. "9,000 cows?" I hear a person behind me whisper, and I think about all the flies that come with them. In the nearly six years I've lived in Shelton County, I've learned a lot about commercial dairies, two of which are within eight miles of my house. At night, their lights illuminate the skylight like a small city. I check my phone. Five minutes until the meeting begins. More people file into the room, and two police officers stand at the door. The local media is also in attendance—representatives from our newspaper, the *Shelton County Gazette*, and a team from the neighboring urban county. I'm sad, frustrated, and angry all at once.

On any given day, our county does not draw attention. Folks both inside and outside of Shelton County do not seem concerned with the fact that Shelton County is a food desert, healthcare desert, and childcare desert. As a resident of Ririe, Indiana, the closest hospital is 90 minutes away and I drive 45 minutes to get groceries. As a school-based researcher, I see how poverty impacts the little ones in the kindergarten classroom I visit three times a week. But on this warm June day, many of Shelton County's wealthiest folks are opposed to the potential site of a dairy that, if approved by the commissioners, would be constructed along Little Pheasant Creek. Looking at the clock, the president of the council grumbles, "It's 8:15 a.m., time to settle down." The crowd falls silent and a man with his back to the room begins to speak to the commissioners in a low voice. "If y'all want us to know what's going on, you'd better speak up," shouts an elderly woman from the crowd. The crowd murmurs in agreement. Forty minutes go by. One by one, people present their cases to the commissioners—three White men, ranging in ages from 60 to 80. The crowd is growing frustrated; no one can hear. Finally, a representative of citizens opposed to the dairy is allowed to speak. Asking for a microphone, she addresses the commissioners and the crowd. On my yellow notepad, I make a list of reasons:

- potential environmental disaster and health risks

- the smell of manure
- biting flies
- increased traffic

As people continue to talk, there is a heated exchange between one of the commissioners and a female resident. Shuffling in my seat, I am incredibly uncomfortable and think to myself, No wonder people are frustrated with politics. As the meeting draws to a close, it occurs to me that no one has mentioned the impact this dairy will have on the school community. What about the undocumented families the commercial dairies employ? What about the questionable safety practices? The non-existent English as a second language (ESL) programs at the local schools? Why isn't the community concerned with supporting multilingual learners? Why am I staying silent? Speak up, Stephanie! Raise your hand.

My Backyard

In 2018, I fell in love with a farmer. No, this is not the opening line of a bad joke, but rather the beginning of my lifelong learning journey (Lemkow, 2005) as a qualitative, classroom-based researcher. 2018 was also the year I moved to a rural Midwestern town and began conducting research in my own backyard. What is backyard research? Cresswell (2014) defines it as "studying a site or people in whom the researcher has a vested interest" (p. 188). As an emerging narrative inquirer, former sixth through 12th grade Social Studies and Language Arts teacher, and daughter of an immigrant, my dissertation research focused on making meaning of how rural educators (i.e., teachers and paraprofessionals) worked with and cared for Latinx immigrant students. From fall of 2018 until the COVID-19 shutdown in March of 2020, I was consumed with my new home community. Before stepping into Ririe Elementary School, I attempted to familiarize myself with the community by attending tractor pulls, the county fair, school board meetings, and graduation parties. I spoke with anyone who would talk with me—parents, grain haulers, nurses, religious leaders, bankers, and farmers.

Shelton County was a unique site for my study for a multitude of reasons. Since the 1970s, the county's robust agriculture industry has welcomed migrant workers every spring and fall. However, due to a changing demographic, over the past 10 years, Latinx families have been putting down roots in Shelton County with their children attending local schools. While economic opportunities for Latinx families were on the rapid incline, the schools were slow to change, having no comprehensive ESL program to support multilingual learners. Therefore, when I entered Ririe Elementary School in the spring of

2019, I was curious about how the White, monolingual learners cultivated relationships with their multilingual, immigrant students, many of whom were undocumented. My theoretical frameworks were grounded in care (Gay, 2018; Noddings, 1984; Swanson, 1991), and as tensions emerged throughout my dissertation research such as subtractive schooling practices and immigration issues (Oudghiri, 2021), I found myself struggling and relied on autoethnography as a starting point while I grappled with the "dual identities of academic and personal selves" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 740). Fast forwarding to November of 2021, I successfully defended my dissertation and the following month, I graduated. While my dissertation research became the catalyst for my future work as a rural researcher, nearly 6 years later, my identity as a backyard researcher serves as a space for reconciliation.

To address these tensions, I adopted a holistic pedagogy by incorporating a place-conscious approach (Greenwood, 2019; Gruenewald, 2003) into my research journey, highlighting the significance of engaging in the "inner work" (Greenwood, 2019, p. 359). Greenwood's theoretical framework blends "critical pedagogy" with "place-based education." He suggests that the inner work begins by reflecting on the question, "How to be here?" and to investigate the complexities and contradictions of knowing, caring for, and integrating into a community. Guided by Greenwood's (2019) critical questions—What happened here? What is occurring now, and what are its impacts and trajectories? What needs to happen here?—this approach underscores the ethical responsibilities researchers hold towards the communities they study.

My Community

Almost a year after that commissioner's meeting, despite my ongoing struggle to find my voice, I have discovered purpose through action. Collaborating with rural teachers, families, and community organizations has brought me a sense of peace. My research has evolved. While I continue to support educators working with multilingual learners in rural classrooms, I have learned from the community's needs that research on trauma-informed care and food insecurity is also crucial in Shelton County. For the first time in my life, I feel truly invested in a community, which brings a strong sense of responsibility. As a classroom-based researcher, I am accountable for the stories shared by teachers and paraeducators as well as my classroom observations. I am committed to giving back rather than simply taking. While I wouldn't label myself an advocate, I regularly attend public meetings and seek ways to support marginalized populations. Although I may not share the same cultural or linguistic backgrounds as my neighbors, I

deeply respect their rights, autonomy, and humanity. Ultimately, my journey from qualitative researcher to backyard researcher has reinforced that my work is never neutral.

As a backyard researcher in Shelton County, I've come to understand that ethical research cannot exist in isolation from the lived experiences of those I study; it must be a collaborative, reflective, and mutually respectful process. My dual role as both researcher and community member complicates my positionality and raises ongoing questions about power, purpose, and whether my work genuinely serves the community or simply advances academic goals. The "backyard researcher" identity challenges me to be more than a passive observer—it demands that I navigate the tensions between my academic responsibilities and my ethical commitment to the community. While I am devoted to addressing local concerns such as trauma-informed care and food insecurity, I am also acutely aware of the potential harm I could cause if I fail to acknowledge the complexity of my role. These ethical responsibilities are deeply entangled with shifting community dynamics, compelling me to approach my work with humility and intention. The path is far from linear—messy, often contradictory—but also deeply rewarding, allowing me to align my scholarly pursuits with my personal values and contribute not only to the academic field but to the well-being of the people and places that have become my home.

References

Cresswell, T. (2014). *Place: An introduction*. John Wiley & Sons.

Ellis, C., & Bochner, A.P. (2000). *Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity.* In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.). *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 733–768). Sage.

Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. Teachers' College Press.

Greenwood, D. A. (2019). Place, land, and the decolonization of the settler soul. *The Journal of Environmental Education*, *50*(4-6), 358–377.

Gruenewald, D. A. (2003). The best of both worlds: A critical pedagogy of place. *Educational Researcher*, *32*(4), 3–12.

Lemkow, A. F. (2005). Reflections on our common lifelong learning journey. In J. P. Miller, S. Karsten, D. Denton, D. Orr, & I. C. Kates (Eds.) *Holistic Learning and Spirituality in Education* (pp. 17–25). State University of New York Press.

Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education*. University of California Press.

Swanson, K. M. (1991). Empirical development of a middle range theory of caring. *Nursing Research*, *40*(3), 161–165.