Fourth-Grade Narrative Fiction Writing:

Using Content Analysis to Examine the Intersection of Place, High Ability, and Creativity

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Dissertation submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

In

Curriculum and Instruction

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March 25, 2020
Blacksburg, Virginia

Data used in this dissertation were part of a federally-funded Jacob K. Javits Grant,
U.S. Department of Education PR/Award # S206A140034

Keywords: narrative fiction writing, place-based, critical pedagogy, creative writing

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ABSTRACT

Writing gives children a chance to practice self-expression and creativity (Dobson, 2015b; Millard, 2005) as they learn needed literacy skills (Calkins, 2003). When children write, they appropriate semiotic materials from popular culture, literature, and the world around them (Dyson, 1997, 2003, 2013). Although the National Commission on Writing (2003) recommended that writing instruction be "placed squarely in the center of the elementary curriculum," attention to writing continues to lag behind other subjects (Coker et al., 2016; Cutler & Graham, 2008; Korth et al., 2016; Simmerman et al., 2012). Vygotsky's sociocultural (1978) and creativity (1971) theories, together with Freire's critical pedagogy theory (1970), form the basis of the theoretical framework used for this research. Various literature on the importance of writing (e.g., Dyson, 1993, 2008), creativity (e.g., Csikszsentmihalyi, 1996), and place (e.g., Gruenewald, 2003) were also influential in its framing.

This study sought to illuminate the possibilities that emerge when rural students in the intermediate elementary grades engage in narrative fiction writing. Qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was used to analyze 237 stories written as the culminating project of the semester-length Fiction unit of Promoting PLACE (Azano et al., 2017a), a place-based language arts curriculum for fourth graders attending rural schools. The researcher first typed the stories, making low-level inferences to correct spelling and grammar mistakes so comparisons could be made across stories about macrostructure elements (Koustofas, 2018), or the overall

structure, organization, and cohesion of the piece. The data were described and catalogued according to codes that emerged from a deep dive into the stories. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to inductively identify thematic understandings across the stories. Specifically, the researcher searched for expressions of identity, connections to place, and mastery of age-appropriate language arts standards. Findings revealed that students can exert agency and express their identities through creative writing and that many students demonstrated mastery of needed language arts skills through the narrative fiction writing task. The study illuminated the value of sharing place-based literature as "mentor texts" for rural students, the importance of providing choice in writing assignments, and the need to foster the writing talent of rural students as a matter of social justice.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Writing gives children a chance to practice self-expression and creativity (Dobson, 2015b; Millard, 2005) as they learn needed literacy skills (Calkins, 2003), yet attention to writing lags behind other subjects (Coker et al., 2016; Cutler & Graham, 2008; Korth et al., 2016; Simmerman et al., 2012). Using Vygotsky's sociocultural (1978) and creativity (1971) theories, together with Freire's critical pedagogy theory (1970), as the theoretical framework, this study sought to illuminate the possibilities that emerge when rural students in the intermediate elementary grades engage in narrative fiction writing. Qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was used to analyze 237 stories written as the culminating project of the semester-length Fiction unit of Promoting PLACE (Azano et al., 2017a), a place-based language arts curriculum for fourth graders attending rural schools. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to inductively identify thematic understandings across the stories, and findings revealed that students exerted agency and expressed their identities through creative writing while demonstrating mastery of needed language arts skills. The study illuminated the value of sharing place-based literature as "mentor texts" for rural students, the importance of providing choice in writing assignments, and the need to foster the writing talent of rural students as a matter of social justice.

Dedication

To Faith, Reese, and Jamie:

May you always be open to life's possibilities.

And to Dan:

Your creativity is a constant inspiration.

Acknowledgments

I am so thankful for the guidance, support, and encouragement I have received from many mentors throughout my doctoral program. Amy Azano, for modeling the career I strive to have and showing me how to get there: Thank you for all you have done to help me shape and complete this work. Heidi Anne Mesmer, for embracing your role as my mentor. I will never forget the power of the words you shared when I asked for advice on a paper: *This isn't quite right, but I will help you fix it*. Your confidence in me as a scholar has inspired my own self-confidence, and your time and attention has been such an incredible gift to me. Donna Fogelsong, for being with me through each and every step of this process and for all your cheerful support along the way. Brett Jones, for agreeing to serve on my committee long ago and for sticking with me through to the very end, continually exemplifying your own motivation model by showing you care about my learning and about me as a person. Mary Alice Barksdale, for welcoming me to Virginia Tech with open arms and for helping me navigate the unfamiliar world of academia, and Patti Talbot, for helping me transition from Master's student to doctoral student, always providing the utmost encouragement, kindness, and passionate example of using scholarship to change the world for the better.

I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Carolyn Callahan, Principal Investigator on the Promoting PLACE project, Dr. Azano, in her role as Co-Principal Investigator, the research assistants who logged many hours on the project, the teachers who taught the curriculum, and the students whose writing I have examined. I am very grateful for the funding and support provided by the federal Jacob K. Javits grant and for the permission to use its data for this study.

I am grateful, too, for the many friends I have made through this process. Michelle Rasheed, you have been such a calming friend since the very first minute of the first day of this

pursuit. I can't thank you enough for being the first reader of every section of this document; your kind and useful feedback has been invaluable. Jim Hill and Tiffany LaCroix, whom I also met on the very first day: thank you both for always being there to answer my "quick questions" about anything and everything to do with this work. Pamela Lindstrom, thank you for being one step ahead of me all along; you helped me to see that this long journey had a final destination I could actually reach, and I truly appreciate the time you spent reading through my drafts and offering so much enthusiasm and advice. To Heather W., Heather T., Erika, Jennifer, Caryn, Amanda, and so many others: Thank you for being part of this journey.

I want to acknowledge, too, the friends who have supported me through the past four years, providing encouragement, childcare, and love. Stacy and your sweet girls, Taylor, Kynna, and Kalyn; and Julie, Ashley, Lisa, Stephanie, Ruth, Emily, Wendi, and more: I am truly blessed. And, I offer thanks to my family. To my mom, who has never allowed a sliver of doubt that I was smart enough to do this or anything else I've wanted to do in life. To my dad, whose love and genuine interest in my work has meant the world to me. To Jessica, the big sister everyone needs: Thank you for calling to check in on me often and listening to—then refuting—all my self-doubts and worries. To Colin, Brandon, and Lauriellen, for rounding out our big family—I was so lucky to grow up with all of you; and to my in-laws, Marilyn and Bill, for being so generous and loving.

To my precious children: Faith, Reese, and Jamie. Being your mom is more important than anything else I could ever do. And to Dan: This whole project was about the value of expressing oneself in writing, but with you—there are simply no words strong enough to explain how much your constant love, support, and unending patience mean to me every day. Thank you.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Creative writing is an expression of the imagination that can be shared by a reader who has his or her own experience with the text (Rosenblatt, 1978). Too often, though, schools do not allow adequate space for students to express themselves creatively through writing. To Cameron (2001), "The writing we learn in school is stripped down, chromeless, noncustomized prose . . . understated, carefully modified, exclamation-points-only-with-papal-permission prose [that] actually bores a lot of us out of writing" (p. 33). Especially in the elementary grades, when children are brimming with imagination and less encumbered by self-doubt or an insistence on getting things *just right* (Atwell, 1998), it is essential to foster students' creative spirits through instruction in art, music, drama, and of course, writing. Creativity, wrote Janesick (2001) "adds texture, complexity, and richness to our understanding of everyday life in everyday settings" (p. 534).

In previous decades, the trend in elementary writing instruction was toward Writer's Workshops (Calkins, 1994, 2003; Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001; Graves, 1983, 1994) that emphasized personal narrative writing as a way to develop discrete skills such as punctuation, capitalization, and spelling while learning to write prose. When done well, this was an effective way to teach students to go through the steps of the writing process of planning, drafting, and revising (Calkins, 2003; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Graves, 1983) before "publishing" it by neatly printing a final copy, stapling multiple pages into a book, or sharing their compositions with classmates out loud.

In 2003, the National Commission on Writing issued recommendations prescribing greater attention and time devoted to writing and writing instruction. Yet, research (Coker et al.,

2016; Cutler & Graham, 2008; Korth et al., 2016; Simmerman et al., 2012) has shown that writing has not, as the Commission exhorted, been placed "squarely in the center of the school agenda" (National Commission on Writing, 2003, p. 3). In fact, some schools, in attempting to ensure students gain the knowledge and test-taking skills needed to pass standardized tests in other subjects, allow little to no time for writing during the school day (Coker et al., 2016; Korth et al., 2016; McCarthey & Ro, 2011; Simmerman et al., 2012).

With the goal of identifying writing treatments that improve the quality of elementary students' writing, Graham et al. (2012) conducted a meta-analysis reviewing all available experimental and quasi-experimental studies on writing instruction in the elementary grades dating back to 1964. Though they classified many of the 115 studies as "weak" in relation to the reliability of their results, the researchers were able to extract enough information to report on the approaches to elementary writing instruction that have been deemed successful over time. Key among their recommendations were that students need explicit instruction in following the steps of the writing process (planning, drafting, revising); learning procedures for self-regulating their own writing; using more creativity and more structure in their writing; and practicing skills such as spelling, handwriting, and keyboarding (Graham et al., 2012). The researchers also recommended implementing comprehensive writing programs to assist teachers in making instructional choices and, in general, simply increasing the amount of time students spend writing. Qualitative research that would elaborate their findings is lacking, which is problematic because "the development of policies and practices to improve writing instruction . . . must be grounded in a clear understanding of how writing is currently taught" (Cutler & Graham, 2008, p. 915).

When repeated day after day without a teacher's guidance on how to really focus in on "small moments" (Calkins, 2003) or how to develop their stories past a rote recounting of life events (Fletcher, 1993), the Writer's Workshop approach might actually stifle the creativity of young writers (Dyson, 2013). Especially troublesome, according to Dyson (2013), is that students living in impoverished communities may not have access to the money and reliable transportation needed for trips to movies, restaurants, and shopping malls—the focus of the personal narratives often modeled by their middle-class teachers. And, though a proponent of the Writer's Workshop model, Atwell (1998) found that as her students moved into middle school, they were ready to go beyond merely describing what went on in their own lives—they wanted to write fiction.

Personal Significance

When I was a first-grade teacher in the early 2000s, Writer's Workshop was the highlight of every day. After our morning meeting (Kriete & Davis, 2014), I would teach a mini lesson on a particular writing skill following Lucy Calkins's popular series, *Units of Study for Primary Writing: A Yearlong Curriculum* (2003). Each book in the series was co-written by a primary teacher and featured photos of Lucy and the teacher guiding students to pay close attention to the "small moments" in their lives, to pore through their favorite books to admire and emulate the authors' techniques, or to continue on with a story past the initial writing session to get at the heart of why a moment in their lives was worth recording and sharing.

My students loved when I modeled my own stories on large chart paper in front of them, always starting with a drawing like I encouraged them to do. Once, for example, I wrote about my consternation upon looking out my backyard window to see a mother possum carrying a load of babies on her back—certainly not something I had expected when moving to a suburb of

Washington, D.C. Another time, I wrote in detail about the phone call announcing the birth of my niece, Anna, and my excited reaction to finally having a baby girl in the family. I wrote often about silly things my husband, Dan, would do or say, so much that the children would often include him in letters they wrote to me, always addressing us as "Mrs. Kuehl and Dan." My acting skills—impressive only to the seven-and-under crowd—were drawn upon in those modeling sessions as I would tend to "forget" capital letters, end punctuation, and how to spell words featured on our word wall, allowing students to helpfully correct me (and reinforce the concepts for the group).

After the mini lesson, I would send students off to grab their writing folders and either start a new story or continue one they'd been working on before. They made themselves comfortable at their desks or in cozy little corners of our spacious classroom, the walls of which I had painted pale yellow, soft turquoise, and lavender. For the first few minutes, I would go around to each student, kneeling beside them and quietly asking what they were going to write about. When I was sure everyone was settled and ready to write, I would call children over to my kidney-shaped table for individual conferences, offering encouragement and a suggestion or two that would help move them along toward mastery of skills they were still developing. I took notes during these conferences to help me determine the needed focus of future mini lessons.

When about 30 minutes had passed, we'd gather back at the carpet to share and celebrate a few pieces each day. The featured author would sit in my rocking chair and call on three friends to offer compliments on his or her work, then we would all chorus, "Con-grat-u-LAY-tions!" Invariably, the little writers beamed with pride—Writer's Workshop seemed to be a favorite part of their days, too.

I learned so much about my students through their writing: what they valued, what they feared, what they looked forward to. How getting their hair cut tickled the backs of their necks; how they lovingly looked after their younger siblings at home; how they agonized over the exact set of Legos to buy at Wal-Mart with their birthday money. In sharing their stories, my students taught me that "observed closely enough, all of life is interesting. . . . All of life is filled with drama. Observed closely, small moments have large impact" (Cameron, 2001, p. 34).

Through Writer's Workshop, I watched my students metamorphosize in the incredible way first graders do, transforming from small children who generally had not yet internalized letter formation or letter/sound correspondence into writers with stories to tell—and the skills needed to tell them in such a way that their readers could understand. My students attended a Title I school (so designated because over 40% of students were eligible for free or reduced lunch due to low family incomes), and many of them spoke other languages at home. For them, especially, I knew it was crucial to ensure they could read and write by the time they moved on to second grade. Without a strong foundation of literacy skills, they would have a much harder time learning other subjects, and with each passing year, they would fall further and further behind (Francis et al., 1996; Juel, 1988; Spira et al., 2005).

As we write, we articulate the thoughts of our inner voice (Vygotsky, 1978). Through the process of transcribing these thoughts onto the page, our ideas crystallize and we make meaning of the world in which we live (Goldberg, 1986; Langer, 1986; Stewart & McClure, 2013). Writing instruction is a matter of social justice, as education—especially literacy education—leads to freedom from oppression (Freire & Macedo, 1987; hooks, 1994). Providing the best possible literacy instruction to all students, particularly those living in poverty, helps level the playing field, and teaching children to write well empowers them. According to Fox,

> Those of us who write best have the most power and therefore have the most control over our lives. It seems to me to be a supreme arrogance on our part as teachers not to see that the granting of this power to our children is politically and socially essential. . . . Their power won't come about without practice and the practice can't come about without purpose (1988, pp. 122-123).

Regarding my own writing life, I have always found it a bit easier to express my thoughts in writing, when I can read them over and make adjustments, than to try to explain myself aloud. I have always done well on school-assigned writing and I have even had a few articles published. I enjoy writing, and I believe I would be considered among "those of us who write best" to whom Fox referred. I also consider myself one of the "creative people" Csikszentmihalyi (1996) described, those who "are constantly surprised and constantly find new ways of looking at a given problem," those who "exhibit curiosity and interest in their worlds" (paraphrased by Janesick, 2001, p. 537). And, like Elbow, I believe "the creativity needed for getting good words on paper is available to everyone" (1981, p. 121).

Genesis of Research Idea

In 2006, months before the birth of our first child, Dan and I moved to a different part of the state, where I took a short-term position teaching third grade at a school where nearly all students qualified for free or reduced lunch. The school was located in the southeast section of our new city, where things looked quite different from the southwest neighborhood in which we now lived. Houses there were close together and dilapidated, and the sites of many former businesses sat empty with boarded-up windows and weeds growing up out of cracks in the pavement. Walking into the portable classroom assigned to me and thumbing through the worn basal readers I was expected to use with my new students, I felt like I had stepped back in time.

The teacher on the other side of the thin walls showed me the math book page the students were on, warned me not to bring food into the classroom because of a mice problem, and explained the daily schedule. The printed sheet she handed me listed times for reading, math, social studies, science, recess, lunch, and the daily specials. Turning it over, I asked, "When do the students write?" Seeming confused at first, this kind teacher eventually smiled and walked me over to a cupboard near the window. She reached down and pulled out a stack of handwriting books, explaining that with accreditation pressures, the students didn't have much time to practice their cursive, but the books were here if I ever had a few spare minutes.

Over the next few months, I found that my new students struggled with basic literacy skills; many seemed on par with the first graders I had taught near D.C. I incorporated writing into their lessons as much as I could, but I was quite concerned that instruction in writing did not otherwise exist in this classroom. Since then, as I have spent time in the city's classrooms as a principal's intern, student teaching supervisor, and parent, I have been dismayed to observe very little time set aside for focused writing instruction. In fact, when I urged one student teacher, assigned to a fifth-grade language arts classroom, to incorporate more writing into his lessons, he told me that his cooperating teacher would "get in trouble" if the principal walked by and saw them doing anything other than drilling students on reading concepts they could encounter on the end-of-year statewide standardized assessment. I confirmed his perception with the cooperating teacher: Because writing was no longer tested in fifth grade (Hulette & Hieatt, 2014), she said, it was not allowed to be the focus of instruction.

For many reasons, I believed writing was good for kids and I felt frustrated to find it was not happening in schools, especially in communities where students face poverty. In discussing research ideas to help combat this problem, though, two trusted mentors encouraged me to look

at what was *right* about writing in elementary education, not what was wrong. Therefore, by studying the narrative fiction stories of fourth-grade high-ability writers who live in rural settings (the focus of this project), I aimed to highlight the possibilities for thinking and learning through writing, and in doing so, I hoped to strengthen the case for why writing must be given prominence in the elementary curriculum. My intention was to apply a similar philosophy to the study of writing that Cameron (2001, p. 28) used when grading her students' writing: "As a writing teacher, it is my experience that if I praise a student's strengths, the weaknesses eventually fall away. If I focus on the weaknesses, the strengths, too, may wobble and even vanish."

Theoretical Framework

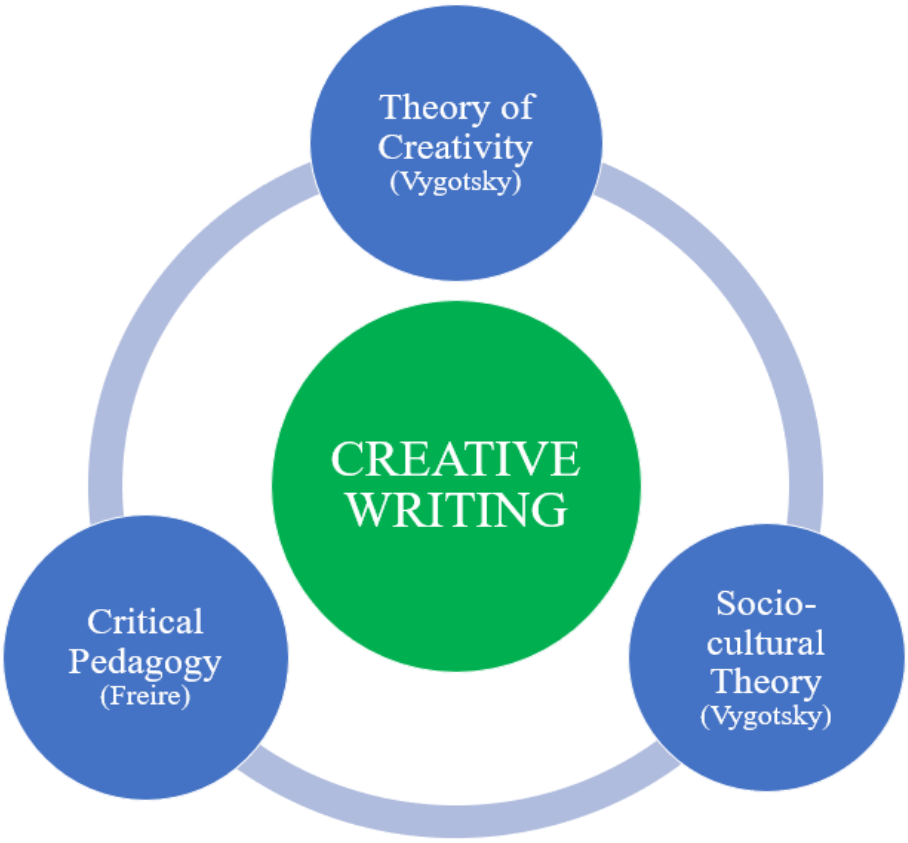
My study was grounded in the axiological assumption that there is value in creative writing. Thus, the theoretical framework was comprised primarily of two contributions by Vygotsky: his theory of creativity (1971) and his sociocultural theory (1978). A second assumption is that true freedom is incumbent upon equitable access to education (Freire & Macedo, 1987; hooks, 1994), so Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy was another lens through which I approached this research. One key manifestation of critical pedagogy is in relation to place (i.e., spatial justice) and the assumption that place is a component of identity that must be brought to bear when framing instructional experiences (Azano, 2011; Brooke, 2003; Dewey, 1985/1916; Eppley, 2010; Gruenewald, 2003; Jacobs, 2011; Jimerson, 2005), and not all places are served equitably by dominant funding structures. Another manifestation of critical pedagogy is that of *critical differentiation* (Latz & Adams, 2011), or the idea that students deserve education in line with their individual capabilities (Tomlinson, 2001). So, students who demonstrate exceptionalities in various ways—including giftedness—but who are not provided

appropriate enrichment opportunities, are essentially oppressed. In fact, Latz and Adams (2011, p. 776) considered underserved gifted students who live in poverty to be *twice oppressed.*

In this section, I will describe the three main theories that form the foundation of the framework (theory of creativity, sociocultural theory, and critical pedagogy) and discuss several concepts that provide support for its application to this work. Figure 1 depicts my conceptualization of the framework.

Figure 1

Diagram of Theoretical Framework



Theory of Creativity (Vygotsky)

Much of Vygotsky's early work focused on the social, psychological, and emotional nature of art. He believed that all people are creative, but that creativity increases with cognitive

development over time (Vygotsky, 1971). According to Vygotsky (1971), people navigate the world by interacting with cultural sign systems through which "the human being masters and transforms his or her own psychological processes" (Bruner, 1996, p. 250), and creativity and imagination are required to be able to adapt to social environments (Moran & John-Steiner, 2003). Children, Vygotsky posited, express a great deal of imagination, but with fewer cultural experiences, they relate to the world in a less complex way than adults and therefore lack the reason needed to possess a more sophisticated creativity (Lindqvist, 2003). In their interpretation of Vygotsky's (1971) theory, Moran and John-Steiner (2003, p. 63) wrote that creativity, however, is "fundamental to the development of all individuals, and through the study of the interweaving of creativity and development, people's true natures are revealed."

Creativity is not only essential to individual development, but society also depends on creativity to propel it forward into the future instead of remaining stagnant in the past, merely reproducing previous ideas (Vygotsky, 1971). Art, according to Vygotsky, stirs the "feelings, emotions, and passions" (p. 249) that disrupt societal inertia and "force us to strive beyond our life toward all that lies beyond it" (p. 253). Thus, creative work is both individual and profoundly social (Ayman-Nolley, 1992).

Manifestations of Creativity. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) conducted an extensive study of individuals deemed especially creative due to their impressive intellectual and artistic accomplishments over a lifetime. He believed it was important to study creativity because "the results of creativity enrich the culture and . . . indirectly improve the quality of all our lives," and in studying creativity, we might learn "how to make our own lives more interesting and productive" (p. 10). To Csikszentmihalyi, creativity emerges not solely from the individual who makes a novel contribution to a domain, but also through the interaction between an individual

and the cultural context in which he or she participates. A person must learn the symbol systems of a culture and understand the traditions of a specific domain before breaking from that tradition in a way that changes the domain going forward. To be considered truly creative, Csikszentmihalyi (1996) believed the contribution made by the individual must be recognized and validated by a "field of experts" within the domain (p. 6). For the purposes of my study, I do not expect student participants to have made a major contribution to the field of creative writing, but I believe it is important to cultivate and nurture this type of creativity in schools so students, having learned and internalized the symbols within the domain of creative writing, would be capable of contributing to the domain one day.

Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky)

Vygotsky (1978) believed that learning was a social process and that cognitive development was impossible without social interaction. In gaining knowledge, learners undergo a process of *enculturation* via social experiences through which they internalize the signs (internal representations of objects or phenomena) and tools (external objects or externalized behavior) of a culture. Individuals mediate their world by creating meaning from these signs and, as we externally express concepts we have internalized, they become internalized by others with whom we interact. The processes through which these signs and tools are internalized develop an individual's mental functions such as logical reasoning, selective attention, higher-order thinking, and language (Vygotsky, 1978).

Symbolic Interactionism. Blumer (1969) presented a theory of knowledge construction in which humans continually and unconsciously interpret their own actions and the actions of others in light of meaning ascribed culturally to objects. Through communication with others within social organization frameworks, individuals derive and modify meanings of objects. Then,

each subsequent encounter with an object will be interpreted based on the current situation, wherein the individual notes the object, assesses it, assigns a meaning to it, and decides how to act in light of the assigned meaning (Blumer, 1969, p. 81). Inasmuch as it relates to the meanings children assign to cultural materials they incorporate into narrative fiction stories—which they write within the social context of the classroom—the theory of symbolic interactionism contributes to my theoretical framework.

Appropriation of Cultural Resources. Anne Haas Dyson's ethnographic research on young children's writing practices (e.g., 1993, 1997, 2003, 2008, 2013) has strongly influenced my thinking about writing and writing instruction. In her many works, Dyson illustrated the ways in which children appropriate semiotic resources from popular culture, literature, their home environments, and school into their written communications. By describing in detail the actions children take while writing, Dyson demonstrated the social nature of writing and the interweaving of oral and written language practices. Approaching her research from a sociocultural point of view, Dyson (1993, p. 25) echoed Vygotsky (1978) in explaining that "it is symbols that link the individual mind and the collective consciousness of culture" and that through literacy, we learn to manipulate the cultural tools of letters and words to take action in the world. In dialogue with their teachers and with fellow students in response to their written efforts, children learn the social meaning of the symbols they can use to achieve functional communication goals (Dyson, 1993).

In the classrooms Dyson observed, the subject matter about which students wrote evolved according to classroom trends. For instance, many children in one class wrote and enacted stories involving the male superheroes they watched on television, but when one student decided to cast herself as the hero of her story, a trend of female superheroes starring in children's stories caught

on across the class (Dyson, 1997). Through the public performances of their stories, students aimed to garner respect and attention from peers, thereby demonstrating their developing awareness of the social and political power of language (Dyson, 1993). And, by adopting and manipulating cultural materials into their own writing, children were "assuming a certain stance toward other people and toward the world" (Dyson, 1993, p. 34).

Clearly, writing allows students to exercise agency in their worlds, and one way they achieve this is by recontextualizing "unofficial" resources like television shows, video games, and songs they hear on the radio (Dyson, 1997, 2003, 2008) into the "official" literacy practices of school (i.e., learning technical skills like forming letters, spelling words, and composing sentences). Moreover, students feel more motivated to write when they are permitted to choose writing topics which they find most interesting (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001; Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Jones, 2018). Dyson (2008) suggested that even approaches to writing instruction that focus on meaning over convention (e.g., Calkins, 2003) are increasingly narrow in their expectations of what and how children should write. Thus, they exert a "homogenizing" influence (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 425) on children's writing practices, causing them to "regularize their texts and fit within the curricular lines" (Dyson, 2008, p. 152), which could come at the cost of "imagination, social attunement, and multimodal flexibility" (Dyson, 2013, p. 58).

Dialogism. According to Bakhtin (1981), language, both oral and written, consists of a dialogue among individuals. More than a conversation, a dialogue is an exchange of ideas built upon since the very first human utterance. To Freire (1970, p. 69), dialogue is "an encounter between [people], mediated by the world, in order to name the world," and naming the world is the essence of what it means to be human, as it is the act of naming the world that transforms it. Because the sociocultural nature of writing (Vygotsky, 1978), especially writing produced by

children in the social world of the elementary classroom (Dyson, 1997, 2003), is a central focus of this research, it is important to note the influence of these views of dialogue to my theoretical frame. External dialogical relationships (Bakhtin, 1981) such as those that occur between student writers, their teachers, their readers, and the culture within which they came to know and understand language, "represent the dynamic intersections between self, other, and culture" (Stewart & McClure, 2013, p. 94). Similarly, drawing from Bakhtin (1986), Dyson wrote, "as children participate in social activities involving text, they come to anticipate not only written language's functional possibilities but also locally valued ways of doing, being, and relating to others" (2008, p. 121).

Critical Pedagogy (Freire)

Paulo Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy emerged from a political struggle in his native Brazil, where thousands of people lived in extreme poverty. In his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire argued that education is a vehicle for oppression when those in political power view students as mere "depositories" into which teachers place knowledge. In this "banking model" of education, students in poverty are denied the opportunity to construct their own knowledge, which could lead to independence. "Banking education inhibits creativity and domesticates (though it cannot completely destroy) the *intentionality o*f consciousness by isolating consciousness from the world, thereby denying people their ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human" (Freire, 1970, pp. 64-65). Instead, Freire advocated a dialogic pedagogy, where teachers and students continuously engage in dialogue as a means of knowledge construction for both parties and which "facilitates the sharing of power and decision making in the classroom" (Stewart & McClure, 2013, p. 92).

Critical Pedagogy of Place. A place-based literacy pedagogy extends Dewey's (1985/1916) notion of ensuring students experience authentic learning experiences rooted in local culture and geography. For Brooke (2003, p. x), "When teachers and students jointly connect writing education to their immediate community, to the regional issues that shape that community, and perhaps spiraling out to [the] national and international world, then writing education becomes motivated, active, creative, and effective." Rather than merely adding place-based activities to the literacy curriculum, Eppley (2011b, p. 100) argued that a "colossal shift in thinking" is needed to prioritize place in the center of educational practice. In fact, in situations where considerations of place are removed from the classroom in favor of scripted curricula meant to homogenize learning across the country, students' relevant knowledge is erased (Eppley, 2011a) and children lose the opportunity to build upon place-related knowledge, abilities, and interests. Instead, argued Jacobs, students should be taught to write from experience because it "honors their voice, encourages their efforts, and, ultimately, follows Freire's idea of praxis from reflection to action to make better citizens" (2011, p. 51).

Pulling together concepts from both critical and place-based pedagogies, Gruenewald (2003) proposed a *critical pedagogy of place* that aimed to "(a) identify, recover, and create material spaces and places that teach us how to live well in our total environments (reinhabitation); and (b) identify and change ways of thinking that injure and exploit other people and places (decolonization)" (p. 9). He offered this pedagogy as a response to educational reforms that served to diminish or disregard the importance of place while failing to examine the relationship between education and lack of economic opportunity. In a study of one teacher's implementation of place-based literacy practices, Azano (2011) hoped that making place the explicit focus of instruction would help students recognize their ability to effect positive change

in their rural communities. Adopting a critical pedagogy of place, Azano argued "place can be a relevant vehicle for promoting 'critical' literacy in the way Freire envisioned," and continued research into place-based critical literacy practices might reveal the means through which rural students and teachers could "transform education in a way that more fully actualizes the possibility of place" (2011, p. 10).

Zone of Proximal Development. Perhaps Vygotsky's (1978) most famous idea was that teachers should aim to instruct each student within his or her Zone of Proximal Development. Within any given educational context, Vygotsky (1978) believed there was a continuum of challenge based on the individual student's developmental level in relation to a task. If the task was too challenging, the student would become frustrated, but if the task was too easy, the student would become bored, and within neither extreme could learning occur. Learning is best accomplished, Vygotsky (1978) posited, when the task is a bit too challenging for the student to succeed independently, but at a level such that with teacher support (or *scaffolding*; Wood et al., 1976), the student will learn, then incrementally move forward through increasingly difficult tasks.

Failing to provide challenging assignments for students who are developmentally ready for them impedes their opportunity to learn (Bennett-Rappell & Northcote, 2016; Latz & Adams, 2011; Lohman, 2013; Peters & Engerrand, 2016). Students from low-income communities and certain cultural groups are at greater risk of being under-represented in gifted and talented programs (Latz & Adams, 2011; Peters & Engerrand, 2016). A curriculum designed to meet the instructional needs of high-ability students helps mediate the frustration and futility that is sometimes felt in school settings where instruction is not individualized (Callahan et al., 2015;

VanTassel-Baska et al., 2002), but all students should be equally eligible to be considered for such a program.

Research Questions

My goal for this research was to identify traits of high-quality narrative fiction writing to articulate and illuminate the possibilities that exist when students are taught using a place-based language arts curriculum. My study was designed to address the following research question and subquestions:

> What can an analysis of narrative fiction stories written by rural fourth graders taught using a place-based language arts curriculum reveal about the possibilities for elementary writing instruction?
>
> - Specifically, what elements of narrative fiction writing can fourth-grade students use successfully?
> - How do rural fourth graders demonstrate a connection to place in their narrative fiction writing?

The following chapter contains a review of the literature surrounding the topic.

Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

Like many aspects of the curriculum, the focus of elementary writing instruction has undergone pendulum shifts across decades. In the 1990s, teachers were encouraged to hold daily writing workshops (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1994) where students were given a mini lesson on a particular mechanical or structural tool, then sent off to write freely about a topic of their choosing—generally, self-focused narratives. As calls for accountability increased in the early 2000s (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002), states began to emphasize standardized writing assessments where students were judged on their ability to craft samples of expository text (B. Williams, 2005). In some districts, writing is prioritized in years when a test is looming and all-but-ignored in non-testing years. In a time when curricular decisions are so politically charged, where and how does creative writing fit in?

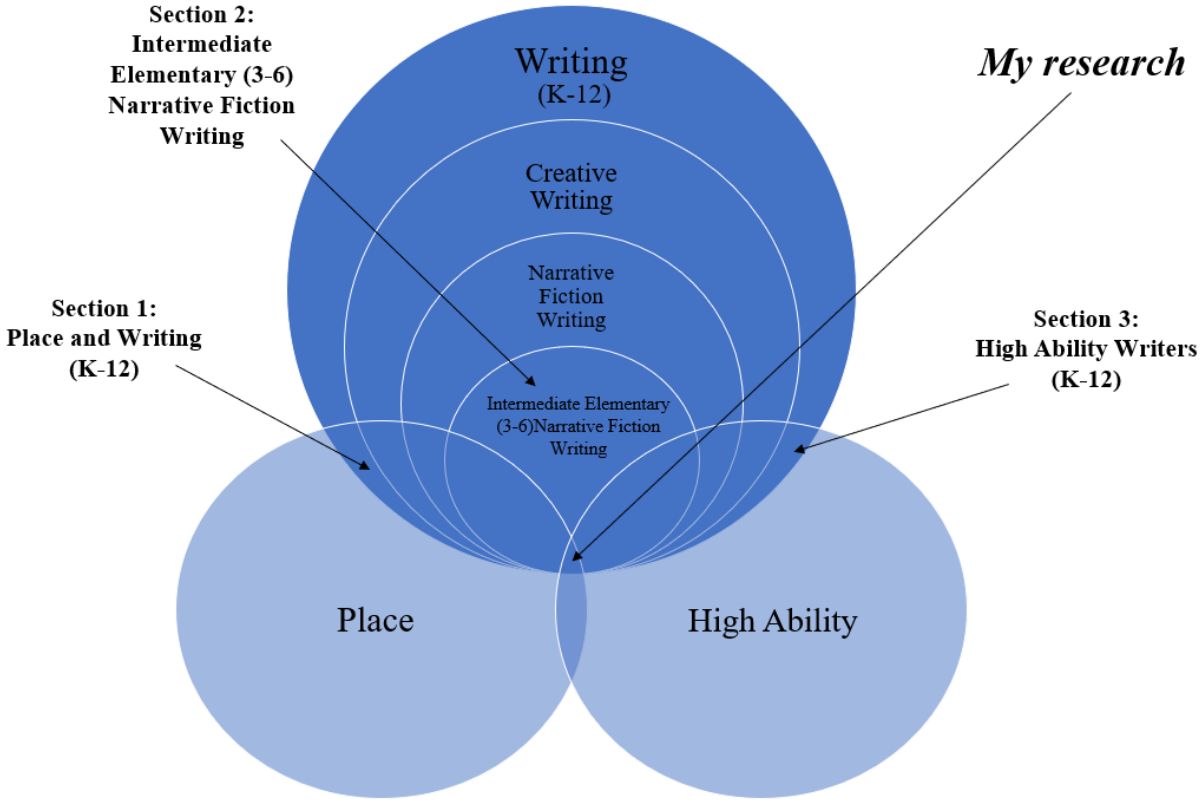
The purpose of this chapter is to establish the need for research in elementary narrative fiction writing, especially as it relates to students' sense of place and high ability in the language arts. The proposed study will address the following question and subquestions:

> What can an analysis of narrative fiction stories written by rural fourth graders taught using a place-based language arts curriculum reveal about the possibilities for elementary writing instruction?
>
> - Specifically, what elements of narrative fiction writing can fourth-grade students use successfully?
> - How do rural fourth graders demonstrate a connection to place in their narrative fiction writing?

To learn what other researchers have discovered about narrative fiction writing instruction with intermediate elementary students, place-based writing instruction, and writing instruction for high-ability students, I conducted a conceptual literature review (Kennedy, 2007). Figure 2 depicts the overlapping concepts explored in the review and points to the specific area of intersection from which my research interest emerged. The first section of this chapter describes the concept of place and reviews studies concerning the influence of place on student writing. The second section defines narrative fiction writing and reviews studies concerning the narrative fiction writing of intermediate elementary students (grades 3-6). The third section defines high ability as it was conceptualized in this study and reviews studies connecting high ability and writing.

Figure 2

Sections in Literature Review



In this chapter, I define the search criteria for each section separately, then describe studies that relate to each topic and the themes I found across the studies. The themes identified in this conceptual review provided important insight into the development of codes used when analyzing students' narrative fiction stories during my study. I conclude this chapter with a brief summarizing section that explains why my study was needed.

Place and Writing

Place-based education is rooted in notions brought forth by John Dewey in the early 1900s. Well before the current educational system's "obsessed" (McInerney et al., 2011, p. 9) focus on standardized testing, Dewey (1985/1916) recognized the disconnect between students' real-world experiences and what they were being taught in the classroom. Dewey believed the curriculum must be relevant to students' out-of-school lives and that to motivate young learners, educators need to provide hands-on experiences that connect children to nature and society in practical ways. Modern proponents of place-based pedagogies—in particular, place-based literacy practices—have viewed the standardization of the curriculum, with its intent to ensure all students learn the same content so they can successfully compete in a global economy, as missing the mark (Azano, 2011; Comber, 2016; Eppley, 2011a; Eppley & Corbett, 2012; Gruenewald, 2003; MacDaniels & Brooke, 2003; McInerney et al., 2011). They agreed that students should learn about the broader world and cultures different from their own, but also that learning must begin with a solid understanding of students' own place—their community and natural surroundings (Azano, 2019; McInerney et al., 2011). Then, when it comes time to learn concepts in math, science, economics, and the like, students can view them through the lens of place, thus gaining a deeper understanding (Smith, 2002).

Some proponents of place-based pedagogy have pointed to a strong ecological concern as the driving force behind their push for including place in the classroom. As climate change threatens the earth we all share, scholars like Sobel (1996) proposed that schools incorporate exploration of the outdoors into regular classroom practice, because deeper knowledge of the environment is the only way they will learn to love it, and without a strong connection, students will not grow into adults who care enough to protect it. Other place scholars have viewed the outmigration of talented students from rural areas as a threat to the way of life of rural communities (Azano, 2011; Burney & Cross, 2006; Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2009; Donovan, 2016a; Sherman & Sage, 2011; Smith & Sobel, 2010). If educators do not take care to teach children the value of place, they may become more inclined to leave their hometowns for brighter economic opportunities, and few people will be left to innovate ways for rural communities to thrive. Rural places have a lot of natural beauty to offer residents, but they are not without their share of obstacles. When people over-idealize their homes (Azano, 2011, 2019; Eppley, 2010), they may fail to see ways in which their communities may not be inclusive of newcomers or open to different ways of being and knowing.

Place-based literacy practices, then, can help students examine critically their communities with the aim of inspiring them to work toward positive change and social justice. When paired with critical literacy practices, which are meant to enlighten students about the way power imbalances limit opportunities for marginalized groups (Freire, 1970), place-based (or place-conscious) pedagogy can empower students to improve the conditions of the environment and its inhabitants. Gruenewald (2003), recognizing that ecology and social justice movements were really two sides of the same coin, urged the taking up of a *critical pedagogy of place* wherein educators would ground their instruction in local contexts while also helping students

consider how places are historically, socially, politically, and culturally positioned. Thus, guiding questions for this section of the review were:

- In recent years, how have researchers attempted to describe the intersection of place and writing instruction in K-12 classrooms?
- What major themes were present across studies regarding place and writing instruction in K-12 classrooms, and what topics warrant further exploration?

To locate studies to include in this section of the review, I conducted multiple searches in key education databases on the EBSCO Host platform (e.g., Education Research Complete, ERIC). Because my primary research interest is in the creative writing practices of intermediate elementary students, I initially sought studies focused on place and elementary creative writing. But, finding those parameters to be much too limiting, I expanded my search to include all grades (K-12) and all types of writing. I used combinations of the following search terms: "place" OR "place-based" OR "place based" OR "place-conscious" OR "place-based literacy" OR "place-based pedagogy" AND "writing" OR "writing instruction" AND "elementary" OR "primary" OR "middle school" OR "high school" OR "K-12." I read the titles and descriptions of results and selected articles describing empirical studies that met the following criteria:

- Published in scholarly (peer-reviewed) journals
- Conducted in K-12 settings
- Discussed K-12 student outcomes
- Reported in English
- Included a substantial description of student writing or writing instruction practices
- Emphasized place.

Then, to locate additional studies, I skimmed (Machi & McEvoy, 2016) the reference lists of these studies and other scholarly articles related to place, and I consulted my dissertation advisor, Dr. Azano, for additional suggestions. After multiple search iterations, I found only eight articles (Azano, 2011; Chisholm & Trent, 2013; Coleman, 2011; Comber et al., 2001; Donovan, 2016a, 2016b; Ruday & Azano, 2014, 2019) that met my inclusion criteria. The two pieces by Donovan described the same study, so the total number of studies to be reviewed was seven. However, I read six articles (Charlton et al., 2014; Duke, 2016; Esposito, 2012; Jacobs, 2011; Wason-Ellam, 2010; Wolf, 2006) that described research concerning place and writing but were not empirical studies (i.e., they did not report specific information about data analysis procedures and/or participants, context, and methods (Charlton et al., 2014; Duke, 2016; Jacobs, 2011; Wason-Ellam, 2010; Wolf, 2006) or did not focus on K-12 students (Esposito, 2012)). Because these studies did reveal information about the possibilities for place and writing and informed my thinking on the subject, I will discuss them in my review. The dearth of empirical studies involving place-based writing in K-12 schools indicates a need for more research in this area.

Among the studies reviewed, I identified four central themes related to place-based writing practices:

- *Theme One:* Place-based writing can help students both appreciate and critically examine their local contexts.
- *Theme Two:* Place-based writing can help students discover their own agency to promote positive change.
- *Theme Three:* Place-based writing can add authenticity and relevance to assignments that meet and exceed curriculum standards.

- *Theme Four:* Students can express their identities through place-based writing, helping them feel ownership over their literacy learning.

In the following section, I will describe my findings according to each theme.

Theme One: Place-Based Writing Can Help Students Both Appreciate and Critically Examine Their Local Contexts

The goal of a study by Azano (2011) was to examine how one rural teacher perceived place and how he incorporated place-based literacy methods into his eighth-grade honors English class. The teacher had grown up in the same small Appalachian town in which he taught, and a strong sense of place was the foundation of his identity. As such, Azano (2011) found that he unconsciously embedded place into his lessons by, for example, linking language arts concepts to local community happenings or relating canonical texts to country song lyrics known to all his students. After observing and conducting initial interviews, Azano and the teacher co-planned a series of place-based writing lessons which would bring place into the curriculum in a more intentional manner. Through further observations and interviews with the teacher and several focal students, Azano (2011) discovered a deep love for the community and strong sense of place was shared by both students and teacher, but she realized they collectively held an idealized view of their shared place. By focusing solely on the idyllic setting and value of knowing everyone in town, the teacher and his students failed to take a critical look at the problems faced by rural places, such as lack of economic opportunity, outmigration of high-achieving students, and a possible lack of tolerance for diverse perspectives. After a content analysis of picture books depicting contemporary rural communities, Eppley (2010) drew a similar conclusion about the risk of viewing place only through a nostalgic lens, calling such practices “comforting and familiar, but unhelpful” (p. 8).

Using Gruenewald's (2003) critical pedagogy of place as her theoretical perspective, Azano (2011) argued that while teaching from a place-based foundation can improve students' motivation to learn, it must also be tempered with a realistic, critical awareness of oppressive circumstances faced by people both locally and globally in order to inspire students to adopt a critical stance toward their local environment (Freire, 1970). McInerney et al. (2011) echoed this sentiment by writing that place-based education practices "which engage students in a deeper analysis of the causes and effects of poverty, racism, and other social issues that affect their lives and communities" are needed, especially in light of the push towards standardization (p. 9).

With an almost opposite relationship to place from that described by the students and teacher in Azano's (2011) study, a group of college students in Queens, New York, who were enrolled in a writing course taught by Esposito (2012), felt disconnected from the urban place in which they lived. In the spirit of Jacobs (2011), who wrote that we must honor *all* places as worthy of study, Esposito (2012) designed authentic writing experiences that would help her students think critically about place and realize negative judgments might prevent them from seeing the beauty and value of their community. "It's our job," she wrote, "to help students identify those places . . . that are personally significant and engage them in meaningful work that deals with real issues" (p. 71). As a culminating project, students identified areas for improvement in their community and created public service announcements via signs, audio recordings, or videos to encourage fellow citizens to take care of their neighborhood. In addition to providing an authentic purpose to their writing, Esposito (2012) found the project enhanced their connection to place by presenting "an enriching opportunity for students to write reflectively and publicly to enact social change" (p. 75).

Theme Two: Place-Based Writing Can Help Students Discover Their Own Agency to Promote Positive Change

A critical pedagogy of place, according to McInerney et al. (2011), "not only interrupts the insular and prejudicial views of people but, more importantly, involves students in a political process of understanding and shaping communities" (pp. 11-12). Reflecting that sentiment in a study similar to that described by Esposito (2012), but with small children instead of young adults, Comber et al. (2001) sought to bring to light practices that work well in disadvantaged communities and to share the possibilities for empowering students—even very young students—through critical literacy experiences grounded in a sense of place. Over a period of days, the teacher of a multiage (grades 2 and 3) class located in an extremely poor neighborhood ravaged by unfair housing practices and crime (Comber et al., 2001) asked her students to use both drawing and writing to answer several questions that moved from specific (e.g., *What is the best thing in your life?)* to broad (e.g., *What would you change about your neighborhood, school, and the world?).* After conducting fieldwork and research about trees, the class wrote letters to local government agencies asking for trees to be planted near their school, including labeled drawings of the students' visions for what their neighborhood could look like. Through writing, the teacher provided "a way to link [students'] social sense of neighborhood 'propriety' with knowledge, networks, and actions in which they took civic responsibility, worked cooperatively, and lobbied and organized as social activists" (Comber et al., 2001, p. 462). Although their neighborhood was not beautiful like the natural settings described in other studies (e.g., Azano, 2011; Chisholm & Trent, 2013), it was still the students' home and, thus, an important part of their identities, and working to beautify it helped bring about pride and ownership over their place.

Similarly, a study of a place-based argument writing unit in a rural middle school (Ruday & Azano, 2019) provided an opportunity for students to advocate for positive changes for their community. Students wrote about a wide variety of topics (e.g., the benefits of playing football despite the risks; the need to build a bigger stadium for the high school; the reasons why a highway should not be built through a local park), illustrating the diversity of thought that exists within rural communities. Though students' arguments represented multiple domains of place, the common thread was a sense of social activism, which provided curricular relevance that motivated students. In contrast to writing the persuasive essay "because you're supposed to write a persuasive essay," one student described the place-based writing assignment as "writing because you have something to say" (Ruday & Azano, 2019, p. 11).

Theme Three: Place-Based Writing Can Add Authenticity and Relevance to Assignments That Meet and Exceed Curriculum Standards

In contrast to literacy programs which seek to improve standardized test scores by providing scripted lessons to teachers that "erase" students' culture (Eppley, 2011a; Eppley & Corbett, 2012), place-based literacy practices have shown promise for increasing student learning. For example, the intervention described in the Coleman (2011) study took place in a rural fishing community in England. Six boys in Year 6 (equivalent to U.S. fifth grade) were selected to participate in a journalism project because of their poor performance on standardized writing assessments. Over the course of 12 sessions, the students learned how to write and ask interview questions, interviewed members of the community about their jobs, and used video-recordings of the interviews to map out and write news stories, which were then published in a community newspaper. Coleman (2011) hoped offering students a chance to write stories centered on place for an authentic audience would motivate the boys and improve their writing

skills, and while post-project comments from the students indicated their enjoyment, the improvement in their standardized writing test scores cannot be causally linked to the project.

Similarly, Donovan (2016a, b) asserted that an analysis of student writing from before and after her place-based intervention with middle school students revealed improvement in length and accuracy of students' writing along with an increase in voice, higher-level thinking, and connection to the community, but substantial evidence of this improvement was not provided. Still, the reported findings of these studies (Coleman, 2011; Donovan, 2016a, b) showed promise for engaging students in writing tasks grounded in place, as did the results of a study by Chisholm & Trent (2013). In the Chisholm and Trent study, which took place in a rural Kentucky school whose standardized test scores were among the lowest five percent in the state, a teacher and researcher investigated tenth-grade students' use of a digital storytelling technique to describe their understanding of place. The authors showed how a focal student's digital story aligned with Stein and Glenn's (1979) list of story elements (setting, initiating event, internal response, attempt, consequence, and reaction) and, therefore, showed her mastery of Common Core writing standards. Duke (2016) also reported that students who engage in project-based learning, which is often built around place, generally achieve higher scores on standardized tests measuring both the content studied and literacy skills used to conduct the projects.

Theme Four: Students Can Express Their Identities Through Place-Based Writing, Helping Them Feel Ownership Over Their Literacy Learning

Frustrated with third-grade students' overuse of technology devices, a teacher and researcher worked to enliven literacy learning with an emphasis on place (Wason-Ellam, 2010). In addition to taking the students outdoors to explore the rural Canadian community in which they lived, the adults shared multiple picture books with students that highlighted the beauty of

the outside world. From there, they facilitated discussions about place and encouraged student responses in the form of art, poetry, and narrative writing. Similarly, Wolf (2006) described a project wherein local artists and poets visited young children in a rural seaside town in England. The poems, dioramas, and photographs children created reflected their sense of place and their individual personalities. Because these collective place-based experiences revealed more about the students' identities, the teacher and researcher in the Wason-Ellam (2010) study felt they gained greater understanding of the children with whom they worked, which helped them to meet their learning needs more effectively.

Another article described a week-long intensive writing course geared to prepare underprivileged high school students for success in Advanced Placement classes. The authors (Ruday & Azano, 2014), who were also instructors for the course, first reviewed samples of students' writing to determine their needs and strengths, then decided on a design for the course that centered on memoir and emphasized *writing as a communal act, culturally responsive pedagogy,* and *critical literacy*. Through assignments that included writing their own versions of George Ella Lyon's "Where I'm From" poem (1999) and contrasting them with Jay-Z's (1997) rap song of the same name, Ruday and Azano (2014) found that students explored their "inner identities" (p. 97), a key part of developing critical literacy. Students' sense of place, and the ways they did and did not feel they belonged in certain places, served as the backdrop for experiences that shaped their developing identities. With this project, Ruday and Azano (2014) demonstrated how a critical literacy approach rooted in place can show students "ways that writing is relevant to their individual struggles and identities" (p. 95-96).

Similarly, in the study by Donovan (2016a, b), the researcher worked with a middle school teacher in a rural oceanside community to incorporate place-based literacy practices into

her language arts classroom. The eight-week unit began with a focus on *family*, then moved to *community and world*, and concluded with *identity*. Donovan (2016a, b) found that students' writing contained deeper expressions of place-based identity as they moved throughout the unit, but her conclusions did not acknowledge that the tasks being assigned to the students (e.g., writing their own versions of George Ella Lyon's (1999) "Where I'm From" poem) would logically elicit writing that discussed students' sense of place and identity. A deeper analysis would be needed to show "the impact of place-based writing practices on rural middle school students' use of language and . . . connection to their community" (Donovan, 2016a, p. 4).

In another article (Charlton et al., 2014), researchers from multiple disciplines described a study of two elementary schools in England: one rural with a mostly-white population and one urban with a large Pakistani population. In one Year 5/6 classroom (fourth- and fifth-grade equivalent) from each school, teachers read the picture book *My Place* by Nadia Wheatley and Donna Rawlins (2008), which depicts the same Australian home once per decade for two hundred years. After discussing the changes from decade to decade (a progression some of the children didn't quite understand), students drew maps of their own "place" and wrote stories about it. Interestingly, some children identified most with the place they lived at the time; some considered their family's homeland (e.g., India, Pakistan) to be their place, even when they hadn't personally lived there; and some connected place with particular people (e.g., their parents). The researchers concluded that participating in the place-based literacy project "allowed a more complex representation of [students'] place-related identities to emerge" (Charlton et al., 2014, p. 169).

Finally, Riley, the focal student of the Chisholm and Trent (2013) study, used the affordances of a multimodal platform to combine photographs and captions to describe her love

of her farm, her horses, and her father, whom she identified as having the most influence on her sense of place. Riley depicted a metaphoric robin flying away from her home but returning later to be with her family, possibly revealing her own inner conflict between loving her home, yet feeling the need to stretch her wings as she grew toward adulthood (Chisholm & Trent, 2013). The authors concluded place-based composition using multimedia techniques can both motivate students and bring about a deeper understanding of place as a core component of their identities.

Summary

With this section of the review, I sought to answer two questions, the first of which was: *In recent years, how have researchers attempted to describe the intersection of place and writing instruction in K-12 classrooms?* From this review, I learned that teachers use a variety of place-based writing assignments (e.g., letter-writing, story reflections, newspaper articles) via multiple modes (e.g., digital storytelling platforms, audio recordings, drawings, blogs). Articles describing these assignments demonstrate that centering writing instruction on place can help students think critically about their hometowns, build connections to local citizens, think critically about problems facing their communities, and create plans to take action toward improving local situations. Place-based writing can take place in rural, urban, or suburban communities, and it can add relevance to the curriculum while also improving learning outcomes for students of all ages. Writing from a place-based perspective can help students explore their own identities while expressing a stronger voice in their writing.

The second research question for this section was: *What major themes were present across studies regarding place and writing instruction in K-12 classrooms, and what topics warrant further exploration?* The themes had to do with helping students find agency, relevance for school-derived learning, and a sense of identity using place-based writing practices.

Unfortunately, most of the literature that existed did not report empirical research using trusted qualitative or quantitative methods. Only a few studies described place-based writing at the elementary level, and a deep analysis of the actual writing produced by students was rarely presented. Moreover, I was unable to locate any studies which described narrative fiction stories written by students who had received literacy instruction grounded in place-based methods. Therefore, a gap in the literature clearly existed, showing that more research was needed to identify the influence of place on elementary students' creative writing. My study was conducted in an effort to close this gap.

Narrative Fiction Writing

In this section of the literature review, I explored recent research on narrative fiction writing in the intermediate elementary years (grades 3-6). Borrowing from Atwell (1998), who described fiction writing as a genre to which students should advance after having practiced enough "personal experience narratives" to understand the story-crafting process, I defined narrative fiction writing to include short pieces of creative fiction written by children that included, at minimum, descriptions of plot, setting, and characters (Fletcher, 1993). For the purposes of this part of the review, I did not include studies involving poetry writing or personal nonfiction narratives. The guiding questions for this section of the review were:

- In recent years, how have researchers attempted to describe the narrative fiction writing of intermediate elementary students?
- What major themes were present across empirical studies regarding the narrative fiction writing of intermediate elementary students, and what topics warrant further exploration?

To locate empirical studies, I searched Education Research Complete and ERIC in EBSCO Host; I scanned the Tables of Contents of several academic journals relating to creative writing; and I skimmed (Machi & McEvoy, 2016) reference lists from chapters included in *The Handbook of Writing Research, Second Edition* (MacArthur et al., 2016) and various articles published in literacy journals. My goal was to describe how researchers have studied the narrative fiction writing of intermediate elementary students using both quantitative and qualitative means with an eye toward designing my own study involving fourth-graders' fictional narratives. With that in mind, I sought empirical studies which met the following criteria:

- Published in scholarly (peer-reviewed) journals
- Conducted in intermediate elementary settings (grades 3-6)
- Discussed student outcomes
- Reported in English
- Included a substantial description of student writing or writing instruction practices
- Emphasized narrative fiction writing.

After extensive searching, I identified four quantitative studies (Koutsoftas, 2018; McKeough & Genereux, 2003; Olinghouse, 2008; Sénéchal et al., 2018) and four qualitative studies (Burrell & Beard, 2018; Dobson, 2015b; Hultin & Westman, 2018; Millard, 2005) that met my inclusion criteria. Within these eight articles, I identified four salient themes related to narrative fiction writing in the intermediate elementary grades:

- *Theme One:* Children in the intermediate elementary grades use narrative fiction writing to play and to explore identity concepts, often borrowing ideas from popular culture.

- *Theme Two:* Intermediate elementary students express creativity in writing through language play.
- *Theme Three:* There are gender differences in the subject and quality of narrative fiction writing among intermediate elementary and adolescent writers.
- *Theme Four:* Narrative fiction writing improves along macrostructure and microstructure measures as students age.

Next, I will present my findings according to these themes.

Theme One: Children in the Intermediate Elementary Grades Use Narrative Fiction Writing to Play and to Explore Identity Concepts, Often Borrowing Ideas from Popular Culture

Writing can be a source of creative play (Calkins, 2003; Paley, 1986) and self-expression (Graves, 1983) for children, who often appropriate semiotic resources from popular culture in their texts (Dyson, 1997, 2003). According to Dyson (1997), "Children's imaginative play is all about freedom from their status as powerless children. Tales about good guys and bad ones, rescuers and victims, boyfriends and girlfriends allow children to fashion worlds in which *they* make decisions about characters and plots, actors and actions" (p. 166). In other words, children incorporate symbols, plot points, and character types from the popular television shows, movies, and video games they view every day into their assigned writing tasks. In doing so, they assert a sense of agency and power into the social and academic school experience, using writing to frame and refine their personal identities within the particular social world of the classroom (Dobson, 2015b; Pennington, 2014).

Building on Dyson's work and informed by a simple survey of students' writing preferences, the researcher and collaborating teacher in one study (Millard, 2005) crafted a multi-day writing project for eight- and nine-year-old children. Students drew intricate maps of

the interior of a castle, then planned and wrote story booklets that included a problem to be solved in each room. With its focus on fantasy and imagination, the project reportedly achieved Millard's (2005) aim of combining play with writing instruction as students established identities as writers and created meaningful stories of personal relevance. Further, Millard (2005) concluded the project allowed student writers to "position take" in the social world of the classroom by incorporating—and reimagining—various elements of popular culture in their stories (Dyson, 1997, 2003).

Similarly, the writing of the nine- and ten-year-old children studied by Hultin and Westman (2018) provided a means for students to position themselves socially through their choices of subject, plot, and story elements, including the appropriation of cultural materials within their texts (Dyson, 1997, 2003). For example, in writing a modern-day fable featuring a teacher as the main character, one student positioned herself as a "good girl" who could convey a morality lesson in her story while also showing her understanding of the world of adults. Conversely, another student positioned himself as a classroom rebel by appropriating violent content from cultural material (in this case, video games) into his story.

The ten- and eleven-year-old boys studied by Dobson (2015b) also appropriated materials from popular culture (Dyson, 1997, 2003) in the play scripts they wrote individually after planning together in small groups. The students' use of writing as "play" was evident both in Dobson's account of their writing sessions, which were full of laughter, and in the humor-filled stories they created. In prominently featuring stereotypical *jock* and *nerd* characters, children borrowed from the "figured world" (Holland et al., 1998) the author called "American High School Drama," but adapted the characters in ironic and humorous ways. For example, one group invented a teacher character, Mr. Rap, who speaks only in rap, becoming both an object of

ridicule and a vehicle for silliness for the young writers. According to Dobson, the students' decision to write their plays as parodies rather than traditional narratives was an assertion of agency, demonstrating how "classroom engagement in creative writing can be empowering in providing the possibility of different participations within different figured worlds and with different identities to perform" (2015b, p. 51).

In another article about the same study, Dobson (2015a) described having designed the assignment using "weaker framing" in contrast to the "stronger framing" required of writing tasks geared toward preparing students for standardized tests. However, though his assignment may not have been quite as strongly-framed as other composing tasks assigned to his students, Dobson himself acknowledged (2015a, b) his revised assignment was a concession to the school leader's insistence on his using the writing block to teach specific genres in preparation for students' upcoming exams. Consequently, it seems Dobson's assignment, which required the students to continue a story he had started (with the setting, characters, and problem already in place), might not have been framed "weakly" enough to truly allow students the agency and creativity he intended to encourage (Dobson 2015a, b).

Theme Two: Intermediate Elementary Students Express Creativity in Writing Through Language Play

A different form of play in writing was intricately examined by Burrell and Beard (2018), who quantified fourth-grade students' use of "language play" such as alliteration, onomatopoeia, and hyperbole in narrative compositions, then compared the frequency and type of such instances to the overall quality of students' writing. In response to a prompt—but with no mention of language play—students wrote stories featuring a surprise from a cereal box; the assessment was repeated the following year. A teacher panel scored each piece of writing according to

organization, grammar, and use of vocabulary, then researchers created subsets of high-scoring, low-scoring, and most-improved students whose writing was analyzed for instances of language play. A comparison across groups revealed extensive use of language play with some stylistic differences. Students used metaphor to show emotion (e.g., "the butterflies in his belly turned into snakes"), ellipses to show suspense (e.g., upon a character opening the door to reveal a surprise, writing "and there was . . ."), and graphemic symbolism to show emphasis (e.g., using all capital letters and exclamation points in certain phrases).

Students in the Millard (2005), Dobson (2015b), McKeough and Genereux (2003), and Hultin and Westman (2018) studies also used language play in their writing, though the researchers of those studies did not label it as such. Millard's (2005, p. 67) students used alliteration (e.g., "evil giants with grizzly grins on their gruesome faces), simile (e.g., "a maze of bones . . . as yellow as old butter") and descriptive detail (e.g., "a wicked, ugly witch with a huge green wart on her nose is wearing a gloomy black pointy hat with purple ribbons"). Dobson's (2015b) students incorporated language play by assigning exaggerated accents to different characters (e.g., a teacher character speaks with an accent Dobson describes as *Jamaican patois*: "Ah tha new girl your late [go sit in] tha corna," p. 46). Students in the Hultin and Westman (2018) study engaged in language play by using silly names for their characters (e.g., a villain named "the evil Dr. Pork Chop," p. 525; monkeys named "Lightning, Mattis, Dustbin, Laughy, Sausage, and Banana," p. 527). Students in the McKeough and Genereux study (2003, p. 551) used descriptive language (e.g., a character bathes "in jasmine scented water, and brushed sandlewood powder and talc on my skin") and graphemic symbolism (e.g., "the girl was an ABSOLUTE nuisance!"). In their results section, Burrell and Beard (2018) reported that higher-achieving and most-improved students used more language play than the lower-achieving

students, and it seemed that the primary purpose of language play was to appeal to readers. More research is needed to explore students' use of language play in less-structured writing tasks to better understand how language play relates to writing development and quality.

Theme Three: There Are Gender Differences in the Subject and Quality of Narrative Fiction Writing Among Intermediate Elementary and Adolescent Writers

To set the stage for his students' extended writing task, Dobson (2015b) drafted the beginning of a play involving a young girl, Lucy, who discovers a strange person in her attic, a plot reminiscent of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1962). In their continuations of the story, both groups of boys immediately relegated Lucy to a smaller role, choosing instead to prominently feature male characters who were variations of the American High School Drama tropes. In line with the assignment, they included some components of the typical fairy tale genre, most likely, according to Dobson (2015b), to appease the teacher and a perceived "superaddressee" (Bakhtin, 1986), a God-like entity who would oversee their work and understand the true meaning of every written utterance. However, they parodized the fairy tale script, introducing irony and humor to lessen what they felt would be a feminizing effect of including an expected conclusion to their story. Maintaining control of their writing through humor, Dobson believed, allowed them to assert their "hegemonic masculinity" while exercising agency over their own creative writing.

In the castle-themed writing project (Millard, 2005), distinctions were found between girls' and boys' writing and their use of cultural symbols. Girls used traditional storybook elements, while boys, like the boys in Dobson's (2015b) study, deemed the fairy tale genre to be "babyish" and drew instead from video games, often including gory imagery (e.g., skeletons, millions of spiders, and "mad" portraits with moving eyes) in their illustrations. The boys seemed to know more about how to design and draw castles, and they based their stories on their

drawings. Girls, on the other hand, tended to write first, then based their drawings on the stories they'd written, emphasizing clothes and characters over castle details. Interestingly, both girls and boys depicted female characters in need of rescue, but Millard (2005) reported that no male characters needed rescuing in any of the stories.

Two other studies (McKeough & Genereux, 2003; Olinghouse, 2008) compared the achievement of upper-elementary and adolescent girls and boys on standardized writing tasks. In Olinghouse's (2008) study, third-grade students were shown one of six pictures to use as the basis for a story, then were given five minutes to plan and fifteen minutes to write. Their stories were rated according to quality of plans and composition, number of words written, and number of words spelled correctly. A hierarchical linear modeling analysis revealed that gender predicted both fluency and quality of students' writing; essentially, girls wrote longer pieces of higher quality than boys, even after controlling for variables such as IQ, handwriting fluency, and reading achievement. Several other studies (e.g., Berninger et al., 1996; De La Paz et al., 2016; McKeough & Genereux, 2003; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2002) have shown girls' superior performance on writing tasks. By considering writing fluency and quality separately, though, Olinghouse (2008) confirmed Berninger and colleagues' (1996) finding that the girls' advantage was not simply a function of their tendency to write longer pieces. In the McKeough and Genereux (2003) study, girls performed better than boys on three of five measures of complexity (number of flashbacks, overall plot structure, and percentage of interpretive character descriptors) and the same as boys on two measures (embedded-story structure and percentage of interpretive flashbacks). According to the authors (McKeough & Genereux, 2003), these findings could reveal a greater maturity in girls' writing during adolescence or a general tendency for women and girls to be more interpretive, as suggested in other research.

Theme Four: Narrative Fiction Writing Improves Along Macrostructure and Microstructure Measures as Students Age

For a piece of writing, macrostructure variables, as defined by Koutsoftas (2018), concern the overall structure, organization, and cohesion of the piece. Microstructure variables, on the other hand, have to do with the writing productivity (number of words, clauses, or sentences), complexity (number of different words used and/or the number of clauses used per sentence), accuracy (correctness of spelling and grammar), and mechanics (correctness of punctuation, capitalization, and paragraph separation; Koutsoftas, 2018). Studies by Burrell and Beard (2018), Koutsoftas (2018), and McKeough and Genereux (2003) compared intermediate-elementary students' writing on various macrostructure and microstructure variables, each showing improvement as students aged.

In terms of macrostructure, the students rated as higher-achieving and most-improved in the Burrell and Beard (2018) study adhered to a five-part narrative framework (J. Graham, 1997) that included opening, inciting moment, development, denouement, and ending. Stories written by lower-achieving students all followed a simpler, three-part structure of orientation, disruption, and resolution. The researchers did not indicate whether particular students in the most-improved group moved from the three-part structure to the more complex five-part framework or whether they had used the five-part framework all along. But, it stands to reason that some or all of the students whose attainment increased most would have advanced from the three-part to the five-part framework, suggesting that students' stories become more complex with age and maturity. From a microstructure standpoint, findings by Koutsoftas (2018) somewhat support that notion. In that study, sixth-grade students wrote more complex sentences than fourth graders, as measured in number of clauses per sentence. With macrostructure variables, though, Koutsoftas

(2018) found very little difference in quality between fourth-grade and sixth-grade narrative writing, indicating that writing quality—if not sentence complexity—may be stable in the intermediate elementary years.

With their study of narrative fiction written by students in four different age groups (10, 12, 14, and 17), McKeough and Genereux (2003) aimed to gain insight into the developmental progression of students' narrative writing and how it relates to the Neo-Piagetian stages and substages of cognitive development (Case, 1985). According to Case (1985), ten-year-old children are in or entering the fourth cognitive stage, *vectorial structures*, where thought becomes abstract. In their study, McKeough and Genereux (2003) examined macrostructure elements (structural complexity and social-psychological content) of students' written responses to a vague prompt instructing them to compose a story including a problem and a flashback. In comparing student writing across age groups, researchers discovered a fundamental shift in the overall plot structure of students' narratives over time. For example, the protagonist's father in one 10-year-old's story suddenly became a dinosaur, and the writer resolved this problem by having the protagonist briefly flash back to a movie he'd seen where the same thing had happened; the protagonist found success in trying the same tactic shown in the movie.

In contrast, older students were able to construct more meaningful flashbacks that constituted separate story episodes and revealed interpretive insight into their characters' history and underlying motivations. They were able to balance internal and external conflicts in their stories and provide complementary conclusions to each, strengthening the cohesion of their stories. For example, one 17-year-old's story featured a protagonist who felt guilty over the suicide of her friend (the internal conflict), and, in counseling a stranger who also felt guilty about a suicide (the external conflict), she was able to help the stranger off a literal cliff while

simultaneously realizing her friend's decision had been outside of her control. From a social-psychological standpoint, students were able to move from an intentional understanding of characters' "feelings, thoughts, and goals" to an inclusion of interpretive elements such as "personal history, long-standing psychological traits, and broader contextual and cultural factors" (McKeough & Genereux, 2003, p. 546).

Summary

With this section of the review, I addressed two questions. First, *In recent years, how have researchers attempted to describe the narrative fiction writing of intermediate elementary students?* Qualitative and quantitative researchers have explored this subject in different ways, but each of the quantitative studies reviewed here (Koutsoftas, 2018; McKeough & Genereux, 2003; Olinghouse, 2008; Sénéchal et al., 2018) necessarily included some qualitative means of evaluating students' writing before attempting to correlate quality measures with factors that were more readily quantified. One qualitative study (Burrell & Beard, 2018) provided quantitative information about the amount and type of language play used throughout students' stories, but the authors also included many examples from their narratives to describe language play qualitatively. The other qualitative studies (Dobson, 2015b; Hultin & Westman, 2018; Millard, 2005) did not include quantitative information, but instead shared rich descriptions of students' classroom experiences and many examples from their writing.

Second, *What major themes were present across empirical studies regarding the narrative fiction writing of intermediate elementary students, and what topics warrant further exploration?* The first three themes I identified had to do with the way students used their writing to position themselves socially as girls and boys, to explore language, and, in some cases, to have fun. The last two themes (Theme Three fell into both categories) considered ways students'

writing was influenced by age and gender. Findings within each of these themes revealed a bevy of social and individual factors that influence intermediate-elementary students' writing. However, the studies—particularly Olinghouse (2008) and Koutsoftas (2018)—left some ambiguity about instructional factors that may also affect students' writing achievement, though other research (e.g., Coker et al., 2016; Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Graham et al., 2012; Korth et al., 2016; Simmerman et al., 2012; Wilcox et al., 2015) has provided some clarity on that point.

The authors of four studies (Dobson, 2015b; Hultin & Westman, 2018; Millard, 2005; Sénéchal et al., 2018) addressed the theoretical implications of their studies in their concluding remarks. Sénéchal et al. (2018) asserted their results supported a model of the writing process that considers text quality separate from productivity. Hultin and Westman (2018) concluded their novel approach of taking a "double focus" on exploring how students appropriate both in-school and out-of-school semiotic resources in their writing has implications for theorizing about students' agency in literacy activities. Similarly, Dobson's (2015b) study supported a theory of creative writing as a source of identity and agency for intermediate elementary children (Dobson, 2015a). At the beginning of his article (2015b), Dobson posited, "creative writing has to date eluded detailed analysis in terms of offering a space in which author identities can undergo change" (p. 41), and he hoped that his findings would fill this gap in the literature by demonstrating how boys this age negotiated their collective and individual identities through a creative writing project. Finally, Millard's (2005) study supported a previously proposed pedagogy she called "literacy of fusion" (Millard, 2003) which highlighted the way children appropriate resources from one part of life (home) to construct meaning in another part (school).

High-Ability Writers

Scholars conceptualize giftedness and talent in distinct ways. Typically, a "gift" is considered a person's high aptitude for performing well on a certain task, while a "talent" is realized when someone uses their potential to practice a skill to the point where he or she finds success (Gagné, 1993, 2004). The theory of nonuniversal development (Feldman & Fowler, 1997) describes giftedness along a continuum from *universal,* a level all healthy people will achieve, to *discipline-specific*, which occurs rarely and only after committed study. In school, students have historically been identified for gifted programs based on high test scores (as compared with national norms) and academic success (Azano et al., 2017a). However, giftedness can be manifested in four general domains: intellectual, creative, socio-affective, and sensorimotor (Gagné, 2004). Talented writers, then, might earn high grades on school writing tasks by using grammar and mechanics correctly, by supporting arguments with details, and by composing cohesive narratives that can be understood by the reader.

The fourth-grade writers whose work I examined were identified for placement in an enrichment program using criteria more expansive than usually used to select children for gifted services (Azano et al., 2017a). The identification process and rationale for its use will be described in Chapter Three, but it is important to note here that the children whose work I studied were not identified through traditional identification processes. In the meantime, I will use the following section to describe several articles which considered the intersection between high ability and writing in K-12 settings. The guiding questions for this section of the review were:

- In recent years, how have researchers attempted to describe the intersection of high ability and writing instruction in K-12 classrooms?

- What major themes were present across studies regarding high ability and writing instruction in K-12 classrooms, and what topics warrant further exploration?

As when seeking research on place-based writing processes, I had originally intended to focus my search on studies involving upper elementary students and creative writing. Again, however, this proved too limiting, so I broadened the search to include studies involving all ages of high-ability students (K-12) and any type of writing or writing instruction. To locate applicable articles, I searched education databases on the EBSCO Host platform (e.g., Education Research Complete, ERIC) using combinations of the following search terms: "gifted" OR "talented" OR "high-achieving" OR "high-ability" OR "advanced" AND "writing instruction" OR "composition instruction" OR "writing" OR "composition" OR "writers" AND "elementary" OR "primary" OR "middle school" OR "high school" OR "K-12." From the search results, I read the titles and descriptions of multiple articles and chose those describing empirical studies that fit the following criteria:

- Published in scholarly (peer-reviewed) journals
- Conducted in K-12 settings
- Discussed K-12 student outcomes
- Reported in English
- Included a substantial description of student writing or writing instruction practices
- Emphasized giftedness, talent, or high ability.

To locate additional studies, I consulted the reference lists of the selected articles. In all, I found eight studies that met my inclusion criteria. Two were quantitative studies (Callahan et al., 2015; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2002) and six were qualitative studies (Bennett-Rappell &

Northcote, 2016; Edmunds & Edmunds, 2005; Garrett & Moltzen, 2011; Olthouse, 2012a; Olthouse, 2012b; Olthouse, 2014).

Within these eight studies, I identified three themes related to high-ability writers in K-12 settings:

- *Theme One:* Talented young writers are intrinsically motivated to write, especially when the writing task affords opportunities to explore their own interests and express emotions.
- *Theme Two:* Parents, teachers, peers, and literature strongly influence the work of talented young writers.
- *Theme Three:* Curricula designed to meet the needs of advanced students by going beyond required standards can lead to higher literacy achievement.

Next, I will describe my findings according to each theme.

Theme One: Talented Young Writers Are Intrinsically Motivated to Write, Especially When the Writing Task Affords Opportunities to Explore Their Own Interests and Express Emotions

Several articles (Edmunds & Edmunds, 2005; Garrett & Moltzen, 2011; Olthouse, 2012a, 2012b, 2014) described the ways in which talented young writers are intrinsically motivated to write creatively, especially outside of school assignments. Intrinsic motivation, as defined by Ryan and Deci (2000), applies to activities individuals find "inherently interesting and enjoyable" which they would do in the absence of a "separable outcome" (p. 55); in other words, external rewards or negative consequences need not be connected with an activity in which someone is intrinsically motivated to engage. For example, Edmunds and Edmunds (2005) reported a longitudinal case study of an extremely precocious nine-year-old writer, Geoffrey, a highly intelligent, sensitive child whose tender nature proved both an asset and a liability in his

school career. Beginning to write prolifically at age five, Geoffrey's writing went through scientific and philosophical phases before shifting to a nature phase that involved a great deal of poetry, evidencing a "truly remarkable awareness of love and harmony" (Edmunds & Edmunds, 2005). Similarly, in a study of ten talented elementary writers (rising third graders to rising sixth graders) enrolled in a summer enrichment program, Olthouse (2014) found they were intrinsically motivated to express themselves in writing, to master technical skills, and to write longer, more interesting stories than they'd managed in the past. For an earlier study, Olthouse (2012a, b) interviewed eight successful participants in a statewide creative writing competition for Ohio high school students. For the older students, their relationships with writing depended upon the context (i.e., school-assigned tasks compared with personal creative writing). They enjoyed writing a great deal, but they found motivation to write was somewhat diminished outside of the creative writing competition in which they had participated. When they did write on their own, however, writing was therapeutic and cathartic (Olthouse, 2012b).

Rather than looking at motivated young writers like the other studies, Bennett-Rappell and Northcote (2016) focused on two students, both boys in Year 7 (sixth-grade equivalent) Australian schools, who were identified as gifted but did not perform at their expected level of capability, especially with regard to writing. The researchers pulled each student out of class for weekly one-on-one instruction lasting 50 minutes per session which involved completing a series of writing tasks leading up to the creation of their own short story. Unfortunately, the *Creative Writing Program*, which Bennett-Rappell and Northcote (2016) developed specifically for this study, was not well-described in the article, yet the authors claimed it helped both students develop self-confidence and positive feelings about school, improve their creative writing, and reverse their underachieving behaviors, in part because the writing tasks centered around each

student's personal interests. In the conclusion to her 2014 article, Olthouse also recommended that talented elementary writers should be allowed choice in writing topics to foster their motivation for writing, a notion supported by educational psychology research (e.g., Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Jones, 2018).

With their 2011 study, Garrett and Moltzen aimed to better understand what factors influenced the work of talented young writers. To do so, they surveyed 32 students attending a private high school in New Zealand who had self-identified as talented writers by applying to a gifted writing program. These students reported that when younger, their writing had been heavily influenced by imagination, dreams, and fantasies, but as adolescents, it centered more on their own experiences, thoughts, and emotions (Garrett & Moltzen, 2011). In line with these findings, Edmunds and Edmunds (2005) suggested highly motivated young writers should be encouraged to use writing as a form of self-expression whenever possible, as writing can help young people—especially those with special intellectual gifts—process their emotions in positive ways. According to Olthouse (2012a), older students' goals while writing centered around expressing and processing emotions, developing talent, and experiencing personal enjoyment, and they considered writing an important part of their identities. Yet unlike the high school writers described by both Olthouse (2012a, b) and Garrett and Moltzen (2011), the talented elementary writers in the Olthouse (2014) study all had positive feelings toward writing, but they did not use writing as an emotional outlet and they had not yet integrated writing as a main component of their identities.

Theme Two: Parents, Teachers, Peers, and Literature Strongly Influence the Work of Talented Young Writers

Findings by Olthouse (2014) revealed talented elementary writers were strongly influenced by their teachers, who provided conceptual and technical feedback, and their parents, who invested in enrichment opportunities like the summer writing program they were attending. Edmunds and Edmunds (2005) described their focal student's parents as being supportive and nurturing, and he received patience and kindness from teachers and peers when he was placed in a self-contained gifted classroom in school. Similarly, Bennett-Rappell and Northcote (2016) claimed (with little evidence) that consistent one-on-one attention from a caring teacher enhanced their case study students' motivation, and although finding regular opportunities for such personalized interactions is not a particularly realistic goal, educational psychology research (e.g., Jones, 2018; Noddings, 1984) also supports the importance of caring teachers for motivating students.

The high school students surveyed by Garrett and Moltzen (2011) felt that their parents had been influential in their writing during their elementary years, but they relied more on trusted peers to provide feedback to their personal writing in high school. In all three Olthouse articles (2012a, 2012b, 2014) and in the Garrett and Moltzen article (2011), findings indicated that talented writers tended to be avid readers who sometimes modeled their writing after that of their favorite authors, a notion that is supported by other literature as well (e.g., Horst, 2016; Olinghouse, 2008; Sénéchal et al., 2018).

Theme Three: Curricula Designed to Meet the Needs of Advanced Students by Going Beyond Required Standards Can Lead to Higher Literacy Achievement

Two studies (Callahan et al., 2015; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2002) used quantitative methods to investigate language arts curricula designed for gifted children. The VanTassel-Baska et al. (2002) article reported on a five-year Javits study of such a curriculum created by

researchers at William & Mary University involving over 2,000 students (grades 2-8) in 46 schools across ten states. The basis of the grant was that gifted students needed a consistent approach to language arts instruction that promoted higher-level thinking and a more challenging curriculum than dictated by state standards. Specifically, the goals of the curriculum were to develop (1) analytical and interpretive skills in literature; (2) persuasive writing skills; (3) linguistic competency; (4) listening and oral communication skills; and (5) reasoning skills in the language arts. To evaluate the curriculum, students were given pre- and post-tests on literary analysis and interpretation, and students were asked to write a persuasive essay arguing for or against requiring students in their grade to read a given passage. The results indicated students in the treatment group performed significantly better than those in the control group on both literature and writing assessments. There were no significant gender differences on the literature portion of the assessment, but girls did better than boys on the writing assessment; still, both gender groups improved as a result of curriculum participation. Students improved on the assessments with repeated exposure to the curriculum. Overall, the results of this study showed the curriculum worked well for many students and integrating reading and writing instruction can be beneficial for gifted students (VanTassel-Baska et al., 2002).

The Callahan et al. (2015) study reported the findings of a three-year randomized control trial of the CLEAR curriculum, a language arts program designed for gifted elementary students, which was supported by a U.S. Department of Education Institute of Research Sciences grant. In multiple states, nearly 3,000 third-grade gifted students participated in the study during which treatment students were taught semester-length poetry and research units. On a post-assessment designed by the research team, students who received the treatment in each of seven cohorts significantly out-performed students in the control groups. Post-assessments covered language

arts content standards for all students and required students to "analyze, synthesize, and make judgments" at a higher level of complexity than required by other standardized tests (p. 150). The researchers did not provide examples of the assessment questions or any type of item analysis, so it is difficult to ascertain which specific components of the CLEAR model were particularly beneficial for students. However, like VanTassel-Baska et al. (2002), they suggested that the significantly different overall results "are promising indicators of the potential for [an] integrated model to guide the development of units that positively affect learning for advanced students" (Callahan et al., 2015, p. 158).

Summary

I sought to answer two questions with this section of the review: *In recent years, how have researchers attempted to describe the intersection of high ability and writing instruction in K-12 classrooms?* and *What major themes were present across studies regarding high ability and writing instruction in K-12 classrooms, and what topics warrant further exploration?* My review of the literature on high-ability students and writing revealed that high school students interacted with writing differently from elementary students in that they used writing as an emotional outlet and they felt more resentful of school-assigned writing tasks that did not promote their own growth as writers. Younger students were influenced by parents and teachers, and older students placed more value on the input of trusted peers and on their own opinions. Talented writers in both elementary and high school tended to be avid readers, but no evidence was presented to show precisely how students' reading influenced their writing. However, two studies (Callahan et al., 2015; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2002) demonstrated that high-ability students in the elementary grades benefitted from curricula that integrated reading and writing and fostered critical thinking skills.

Overall, while these studies have helped explicate the motivations and personalities of young writers, there was a gap in the literature regarding the actual writing such students produce. Only one study (Edmunds & Edmunds, 2005) provided substantial examples of children's writing, but the article described just one child and did not give very much information about the type of writing instruction he received in school. My study, which involved analyzing and describing the creative writing of high-ability students taught using a revised version of the CLEAR curriculum (Callahan et al., 2015), attempted to close this research gap.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to establish the need for research in elementary narrative fiction writing, especially as it relates to students' sense of place and high ability. Through this review, I identified several gaps in the literature which my study then addressed.

First, though several studies described the use of place-based literacy methods in K-12 settings, no existing studies had looked at the influence of place or place-based literacy curricula on elementary students' creative writing. While working on this review, an *aha!* moment came when Millard (2005) explained how one of her students, Sunil, began to incorporate semiotic resources from his home culture as a Sikh Muslim into his writing. As he progressed, "elements of Indian folktales, shared with his mother, began to muscle into his drawing and eventually become the key focus of his work" (p. 68). As I will describe further in the following chapter, the students whose writing I studied were from a particular rural region, and their instruction in fiction as a genre was grounded in place-based literacy pedagogy (Azano, et al., 2017a). Millard's example helped me identify instances where students reflected their home culture and

place in their narrative writing, and when semiotic resources from their rural upbringing seemed to "muscle into" their stories.

Second, although I was able to locate multiple studies describing narrative fiction writing with intermediate elementary students, each study described projects in which students were assigned a very specific writing task stemming from a prompt or picture. While a few of the studies took place across several days, none of the sets of writing samples was drawn from stories whose ideas were student generated. Most of these studies' authors described the tasks as "creative," but some children might have found these of assignments forced and stifling (Garrett & Moltzen, 2011). Clearly, more research was needed on writing done by intermediate elementary students who were free to choose their own topic, structure, and story elements such as character and setting. Moreover, I was unable to locate any studies on intermediate elementary student writing that represented the culminating project of a concentrated fiction-writing unit. Research was needed to understand how children this age approach a more open-ended writing assignment after having been taught how fiction works as a genre.

Of note, too, is that of the eight studies on intermediate elementary writing reviewed here, only two (Koutsoftas, 2018; Olinghouse, 2008) described the writing of children in the United States. Three studies (Burrell & Beard, 2018; Dobson, 2015b; Millard, 2005) took place in England, two studies (McKeough & Genereux, 2003; Sénéchal et al., 2018) took place in Canada, and one study (Hultin & Westman, 2018) took place in Sweden. The dearth of research concerning intermediate-elementary narrative fiction writing in U.S. schools revealed another gap in the literature that my study attempted to fill. Especially since the focus of literacy instruction in the U.S. has shifted toward preparation for standardized tests in recent years, my

study illustrated why narrative fiction writing still deserves a place in the elementary literacy curriculum.

Further, the study limitations reported by multiple authors (e.g., Garrett & Moltzen, 2011; Olthouse, 2012a; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2002) revealed concerns that students being studied were from relatively advantaged socioeconomic groups and that more research in writing instruction was needed with different student populations (Callahan et al., 2015). The students whose writing I studied were from rural schools located in communities with high incidences of poverty (Azano et al., 2017a); consequently, my study may help bring about needed attention to communities which are sometimes overlooked in literacy research (Hayes, 2017).

Finally, when considering studies concerning the intersection of high ability and writing, several articles discussed talented student writers, but little information about the writing itself was offered. My study, then, provides a unique perspective on writing instruction by delving into the possibilities discovered when taking a deep look at the narrative fiction writing of high-ability students who have been instructed on how to approach literacy through a place-based lens.

Chapter Three

Methods

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the methods used in a research study investigating the following question and subquestions:

> What can an analysis of narrative fiction stories written by rural fourth graders taught using a place-based language arts curriculum reveal about the possibilities for elementary writing instruction?
>
> - Specifically, what elements of narrative fiction writing can fourth graders use successfully?
> - How do rural fourth graders demonstrate a connection to place in their narrative fiction writing?

First, I explain the research paradigm in which this study was rooted. Then, I articulate the rationale for utilizing qualitative methods, describe the larger research project from which this study's data were generated, discuss the data analysis methods used, and describe efforts to ensure trustworthiness, particularly how my role of researcher-as-instrument influenced the study.

Paradigm Affiliation

A *paradigm* is the worldview that guides a researcher's methodological decisions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Because I hold to the qualitative stance that there are many "truths" researchers can find or attempt to find, my research philosophy does not align with positivist or post-positivist traditions (Leavy, 2014). Instead, my beliefs are grounded in interpretivist thinking and most closely mirror the constructivist paradigm as described by Guba and Lincoln (1994). Epistemologically, constructivists believe that knowledge is co-constructed (Leavy,

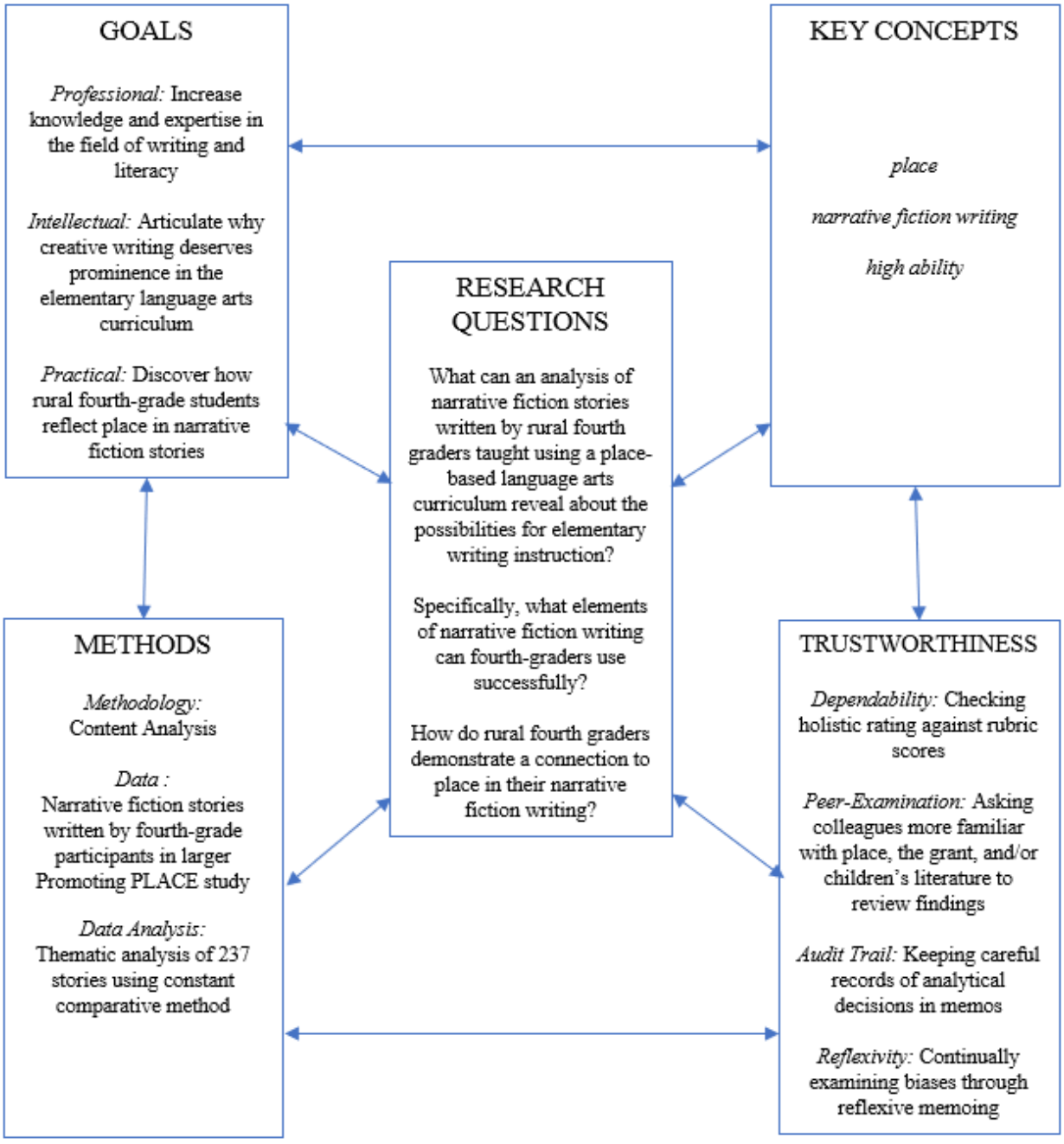
2014). In fact, the "findings" of constructivist-centered research are literally *created*—not found—from the interactions among the investigator and participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111). In terms of ontology, I agree with Marcus and Fischer (1986), who, according to LeCompte & Preissle (1994, pp. 149-150), considered reality to be "personally constructed and located in the combined experiences of many people," with understanding increasing as "multiple realities, voices, or stories" are presented. Thus, constructivists embrace a hermeneutical/dialectical methodology aimed at collectively reconstructing previously-held beliefs through interpretations resulting from dialogue in which ideas and opinions are exchanged (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), constructivism, with its core values of "altruism and empowerment" is commensurate with critical theory, which also informs my research, as it is possible to draw from compatible paradigms (Maxwell, 2005). In both critical theory and constructivism, according to Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 114), values have "pride of place," but critical theory places greater emphasis on the historical situatedness of the subject under study, or "the social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender antecedents" of the situation.

Because all qualitative research is based on the philosophical assumption that "reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds" (Merriam, 1998), a qualitative design is the appropriate choice for my study. In Figure 3, I have adapted Maxwell's framework for designing qualitative research. I outlined the key concepts and research questions in Chapters One and Two, and I discuss each of the remaining components of the framework throughout this chapter.

Figure 3

Research design



Research Goals

My goals for conducting this study were simultaneously professional, intellectual, and practical. Professionally, I aimed to increase my knowledge and expertise in the field of writing

and literacy at the elementary level by immersing myself in the imaginations of fourth graders. Intellectually, my goal was to articulate the intangible reasons why creativity and creative writing are essential and deserve prominence in the curriculum. Practically, my goals were (a) to identify and describe what is exceptional about children's narrative fiction writing; and (b) to discover how rural fourth-grade children reflect a sense of place in their writing after being taught using a place-based curriculum.

Having recognized that writing—and particularly creative writing—has been neglected in the elementary curriculum (Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Dyson, 2013), the purpose of my study is to investigate the possibilities for its continued inclusion and increased emphasis.

Description of the Study

My study examined a subset of data from a federally-funded Jacob K. Javits research study called Promoting PLACE (Azano et al., 2017a), in which 241 fourth graders who live in rural communities in the southeastern United States wrote narrative fiction stories as the culminating project of a semester-length Fiction unit belonging to a larger, two-year language arts curriculum. For this study, I first reviewed curriculum materials, then typed all of the narrative fiction stories and wrote "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973) of the data set. Then, I used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to inductively analyze these stories through the lenses of narrative fiction writing and place, using a theoretical framework combining the work of Vygotsky (theory of creativity, 1971; sociocultural theory, 1978) and Freire (critical pedagogy, 1970). My goal in conducting this study was to investigate the possibilities for writing instruction when narrative fiction writing is given a prominent role in the elementary curriculum.

One of the goals of Promoting PLACE (Azano et al., 2017a) was to increase the access of gifted education services to students in rural settings, who are traditionally underrepresented in gifted programs, by expanding the criteria by which students were evaluated for eligibility to

receive gifted services. The alternative criteria, modeled after Lohman's (2013) Opportunity to Learn paradigm, were (a) locally-normed scores on the verbal portion of the Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT); and (b) teacher ratings on the Scales for Rating the Behavioral Characteristics of Superior Students (Renzulli et al., 2009; Renzulli, et al., 2013) after teachers received training on how to properly use the instrument (Azano et al., 2017a).

A second goal was to determine whether a language arts curriculum that had been adapted to emphasize place could influence students' achievement and self-efficacy in both reading and writing. The grant provided funding to revise the curriculum, train teachers in its use, conduct frequent observations to ensure fidelity of implementation, and continuously evaluate the program's success. Participating students were taught using four semester-length curriculum units: third graders used Fairy Tale and Poetry units, and fourth graders used Research and Fiction units.

Fiction Unit

The Fiction Unit of the Promoting PLACE curriculum, like each of the other units, was adapted from the existing CLEAR language arts curriculum (Azano et al., 2017b; Callahan et al., 2017). Over the course of 17 lessons, designed to be used weekly but adaptable to suit the individual teachers' schedules, participants learned about various elements of fiction (e.g., character development, use of dialogue) through reading classic works of literature like *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (B. Smith, 1943) and *The Witches* (Dahl, 1983), as well as more recent texts like *Wonder* (Palacio, 2012) and *Hoot* (Hiassen, 2002); a complete list of readings can be found in Appendix A. Writing assignments were given for each lesson, helping to emphasize the interconnection between reading and writing; a sample lesson plan can be found in Appendix B.

The final assignment for the unit was the narrative fiction story; please see Appendix C for the handout shared with the students as they began working on their stories.

I first learned about the Promoting PLACE grant in 2016, during its third year of implementation and my first year as a doctoral student at Virginia Tech. My dissertation advisor, Dr. Amy Price Azano, was the co-Principal Investigator of the study, and several of my graduate student colleagues were employed as research assistants for the grant. While I had no direct involvement, I was familiar with the project.

Throughout the 2018-2019 academic year, I worked closely with Dr. Azano to determine the direction and scope of my dissertation project. The "motivating discontent" that repeatedly drove our discussions was my frustration with the under-emphasis of writing instruction I perceived in the classrooms I frequently visited in my role of student teaching supervisor, and I knew I wanted to use my dissertation to highlight the many reasons why writing instruction should receive more emphasis at the elementary level. I especially wanted to focus on intermediate elementary writers (students in grades 3-6) because I was interested in the creative writing students could do once they had more-or-less mastered lower-level skills such as forming letters, using punctuation and capitalization correctly, and spelling in an easily-discernible way. In other words, I was concerned more with *macrostructure* variables (i.e., the overall structure, organization, and cohesion of a piece of writing) than *microstructure* variables (i.e., sentence length, complexity, accuracy, and mechanics; Koutsoftas, 2018). After considering multiple ways I could approach this topic, Dr. Azano brought up the possibility of examining data from the grant—specifically, the stories the fourth-grade students had written as the culminating project of the Fiction unit. This idea excited me because it encompassed several factors important to my work: (a) student writers of the target age, (b) narrative fiction writing, and (c)

an underlying goal of increasing equity in education. After developing my research questions and proposing potential methods, Dr. Azano and Dr. Carolyn Callahan (the study's Principal Investigator) added me as a research assistant on the IRB protocol for the project.

Generated Data

The data for my study consisted of the narrative fiction stories written by all fourth-grade participants in the Promoting PLACE study who received instruction from teachers using the Fiction unit as well as the curriculum materials that comprised the unit. Often, documents to be analyzed in qualitative research are produced independently from the study at hand, which could be considered an advantage in that they are "nonreactive, that is, unaffected by the research process" and can "ground an investigation in the context of the problem being investigated" (Merriam, 1998, p. 126). With my study, the documents to be analyzed—the narrative fiction stories written by fourth-grade students—were generated prior to, and independent of, my investigation; my study had not been conceptualized until after the data had been collected by researchers working on the Promoting PLACE grant.

Incidentally, though the students involved in the original study were identified as demonstrating high ability in one or more areas using the alternate criteria outlined by the grant (Azano et al., 2017a), they may not have been considered "gifted" in the traditional sense in the same way as students described in the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. Certainly, there is no expectation that the stories written by these children would necessarily embody characteristics of students who were traditionally identified—perhaps by means of nationally-normed standardized tests—for giftedness in language arts.

Methodology

Content analysis, which Hoffman et al. (2011, p. 30) define as "the method of making inferences from texts and making sense of these interpretations in a context surrounding the text," is the methodology I employed for this study. Content analysis is often used in quantitative studies (Eppley, 2010; Hoffman et al., 2011) to enumerate the occurrences of a particular instance within a text (e.g., the number of conjunctives used in a high school textbook), then make inferences about the messages conveyed within the text based on those occurrences. However, researchers (e.g., Aulls, 2003; Azano et al., 2017c; Biddle & Azano, 2016; Eppley, 2010) have used content analysis in qualitative studies as well. Qualitative content analysis, according to Hsieh and Shannon (2005, p. 1278), is used "for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns."

According to Krippendorf (2004), a researcher using content analysis must (a) identify the data to be analyzed (in this case, the narrative fiction stories generated by the implementation of the Fiction unit of the Promoting PLACE curriculum); (b) define the data (a thick description of the narrative fiction stories; Geertz, 1973); (c) describe the population from which the data are drawn (fourth-grade participants in a language arts enrichment program who attend rural schools); (d) explain the context relative to the data analysis (the de-emphasis of writing instruction in U.S. schools (Coker et al., 2016; Cutler & Graham, 2008; Korth et al., 2016; Simmerman et al., 2012) and the value of creative writing for children (Olthouse, 2012a, 2012b, 2014; Pennington, 2014)); (e) establish the boundaries of the analysis (all narrative fiction stories written by student participants in the larger Promoting PLACE grant); and (f) articulate the target of the inferences (students' expressed connections to place in their narrative fiction stories).

Two studies (Azano et al., 2017c; Eppley, 2010) significantly influenced my understanding of content analysis and its application to qualitative research, so I have included a brief description of each below.

Eppley, 2010

Using a poststructuralist theoretical framework (B. Davies, 2000) to interrogate discourse surrounding rurality, Eppley (2010) conducted a content analysis of 24 children's picture books depicting contemporary rural settings to get a sense of what messages such books might be sending about rural residents and rural culture. Eppley supported her use of qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), which relies on coding categories derived from the data, by explaining that she was embarking on a "new line of inquiry" for which no preconceived categories existed in previous research. Following Tesch (1990), Eppley took notes on depictions of characters, places, and activities during repeated readings of the data set; those notes were the foundation of the codes and categories she refined during subsequent readings; findings were presented according to "major categories" (Eppley, 2010).

Azano, Tackett, & Sigmon, 2017c

Interested in the ways children with autism were depicted in picture books, Azano and colleagues pulled together a collection of 35 books featuring children with autism available in the public marketplace. The three researchers first previewed each book holistically to get a sense of the way the illustrations communicated its overall message. During a second reading, they recorded notes about their general impressions of the text, the characterization of individuals with autism, the treatment of children with autism by others, and the narrator's role in the story. Through multiple rereadings and several meetings, the group used the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to compare and incorporate new insights with

developing categories and codes. They continually returned to the texts seeking confirming or disconfirming evidence to refine their understandings and eventually identified five themes related to the portrayal of children with autism in picture books. They presented these themes as empirical assertions (Erickson, 1986) and discussed ways teachers can use such books to help students understand and accept people with autism.

Because I was not involved in generating the data for the current study, it made sense to treat the students' narrative fiction stories as if they were published works pulled from the bookstore shelves in the same manner Azano and colleagues (2017c) and Eppley (2010) approached the picture books that comprised their respective data sets.

Reviewing Curriculum Materials

Document analysis is an approach to qualitative research in which the investigator analyzes documents related to the study instead of, or in addition to, interview transcripts, field notes, and so on (Petty et al., 2012). According to Dexter (1970, p. 11, quoted in Merriam, 1998), "documents should be used when it appears they will yield *better* or *more* data . . . than other tactics." This is certainly true of my study, as an analysis of the actual writing produced by elementary students yielded rich data that provided answers to my research questions.

Because one of my research questions posited how fourth graders demonstrate a connection to place in their narrative fiction writing, I looked to the Fiction unit to determine ways in which the instruction students received may have elicited such demonstrations before conducting a content analysis of the writing itself.

The Fiction unit of the Promoting PLACE curriculum consisted of 17 lessons meant to guide students through the fiction-writing process. Each lesson contained multiple supplementary items (e.g., story selections, sample activities, writing prompts). I read through

the entire unit several times, writing notes and memos pertaining to my inquiry for the purpose of later comparing students' stories to the curriculum materials from which they were derived to ascertain specific ways in which the instruction students received may have shaped the stories they eventually produced (Aulls, 2003).

Process for Organizing and Describing Content

As part of the Promoting PLACE research project (Azano et al., 2017a), 241 fourth-grade students from rural schools in the southeastern United States wrote narrative fiction stories as the culminating assignment of the semester-length Fiction unit. The stories were scanned by grant personnel and uploaded into a secure Dropbox file. Two of the stories were illegible, so they were eliminated from the data set. Two other stories were written as comic strips, and because that was not the form of writing under study, they were also eliminated from the data set, bringing the total number of stories to be studied to 237. Girls wrote 119 of the stories and boys wrote 103 of the stories; gender information was missing for 15 of the authors.

Typing

My first step was to type all 237 stories to create a data set with a more uniform appearance, which prevented me from being distracted by factors such as students' handwriting and facility with microstructure elements of writing (Koutsoftas, 2018). I used low-level inferences to correct basic grammar or mechanical mistakes because the focus of this research involved the macrostructure story elements, not microstructure elements. Without making notes on individual pieces, I recorded simple "preliminary jottings" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 21) about general topics or similarities I noticed among the stories while typing them. The typing process allowed for a slow, deliberate first look at the data, and after typing all of the stories, I wrote a long analytic memo reflecting on my overall sense of the data corpus.

Next, I reread the typed version of each story. This time, I used a simple form to record genre, basic story elements (plot, characters, setting), and any instances I recognized of students reflecting place or rurality in their writing (see Appendix D). I simultaneously used a legal pad to create a master list with separate pages dedicated to writing notes about distinct story elements or recurring themes (e.g., bullying, heroism, gender of protagonists).

After re-reading the entire data corpus, I used Microsoft Excel to create a matrix in which I entered the information from the forms and master list (see Appendix E). I then copied and pasted the matrix into multiple worksheets, sorting the rows according to features such as genre and dialogue use. I studied these worksheets and wrote analytic memos (Saldaña, 2016) describing what I saw, paying special attention to notable trends. "Whenever anything related to and significant about the coding or analysis of data comes to mind," Saldaña (2016, p. 45) advised, "stop whatever you are doing and write a memo about it *immediately,"* with the goal being to "reflect and expound upon the data" rather than simply summarizing them.

Holistic Rating

Upon reading the stories for the second time, I assigned each story a holistic rating between *1* (the least-impressive stories) and *3* (the most-impressive stories) as a first level of organizational coding (Maxwell, 2005). Designating one group of stories with the highest rating created a "bin" of samples (Maxwell, 2005, p. 97) from which I expected to be able to discover "the possibilities" for fourth-grade narrative fiction writing. Though the decision-making for assigning ratings to the stories relied primarily on the intuition I have developed over a lifetime of reading, writing, and teaching, it was also the students' use of details, description, humor, and story development/resolution that most influenced my impressions. Generally, stories rated as *3* included clear characters, cohesive plots (following the traditional five-part structure of

introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, and *resolution* as described in the curriculum), dialogue that advanced the stories, descriptive language, and advanced vocabulary. Stories rated as *1* tended to include characters who were not described or not introduced, confusing or underdeveloped plots, absent or unresolved conflicts, imbalanced attention to story components, ineffective execution or delivery of story events, or they were simply "bed-to-bed" accounts of a character's day. Stories rated as *2* fell somewhere in the middle. Fifty-four stories were rated as *3*, 72 stories were rated as *2*, and 111 stories were rated as *1*.

As I continued to read and analyze the stories, I recognized the need to further stratify the sample to help me articulate what some students could do exceptionally well. Therefore, I designated 23 stories as "very best" and assigned them a new rating of *4*. Later, as it became clear that there were certain stories that stood out far beyond the rest in terms of quality, I carefully considered each of the 23 "very best" stories and pulled out ten which were clearly among "the best of the best." I assigned each of these a new, top rating of *5*. The final totals for each rating were as follows:

- 1 = 111 stories
- 2 = 72 stories
- 3 = 31 stories
- 4 = 13 stories
- 5 = 10 stories

Table 1 shows the title, genre[1], word count, and author gender for each of the top ten stories. (The stories are presented alphabetically; I did not rank them from 1-10.) In Appendix F, I share a brief summary of each of the top ten stories to illustrate what the most exceptional writing found in the data set was like.

[1] A description of how I defined genre can be found on Table 4.

Table 1

Top Ten Stories in Terms of Holistic Quality Rating

Title	Genre	Word Count	Female Author	Male Author
Bootsy Adventures, Book One: Visions	Adventure	2,469	√	
Cayley's Crazy Catastrophe	Realistic fiction (with magical/supernatural elements)	1,401	√	
High School Magic	Realistic fiction (with magical/supernatural elements)	963	√	
Hill Valley Kingdom	Fairy tale	920		√
Island	Adventure	2,143	√	
The Meaning of the Necklace	Fairy tale	614	√	
My Lucky Day	Realistic fiction	1,536		√
The Mystical Forest	Fantasy	1,706	√	
The Trouble Maker	Realistic fiction	1,432	√	
The Vengeful Twins	Fantasy	1,249	√	

Comparison with Rubric Scores. In an effort to ensure reliability, I compared my ratings with the rubric scores assigned by six trained raters who were part of the larger Promoting PLACE study. These raters independently evaluated the stories according to the rubric included in the curriculum (see Appendix G) and assigned scores. I was able to access rubric scores for 209 of the 237 stories, and I compared my holistic ratings to those scores as a means of establishing trustworthiness. The total number of points possible on the rubric was 40, and scores ranged from 15 to 40 with an overall mean score of 28.4 and a median score of 29. For the purposes of establishing reliability for the larger study, two raters each scored a selection of 13 stories and a consensus score was reached for each; I used those consensus scores in my calculations. There were also 21 stories that were scored by two or more raters but for which a consensus score was not reported. For those stories, I assigned an average score, rounding up when the average was a decimal (following the pattern of the larger study's consensus-reaching

method). However, there were three stories (#023, #031, #041) for which the discrepancy between the two ratings was very wide, with 15, 13, and 12 points separating the two raters' scores, respectively. Consequently, I decided to remove the scores for these three "outlier" stories from my own tabulations.

Additionally, there was one story (#077) that received a score far lower than I would have expected (20 out of 40 points). I carefully reviewed the scored rubric and found I disagreed on several points. For example, the rater gave the story 1 out of 4 for "conflict," highlighting the rubric's phrase, "there is no major conflict," whereas I believed there to be a strong "person vs. self" conflict represented throughout the story. To resolve this discrepancy, I asked a second trained rater to read and score the story. The second rater gave the story a score of 35 out of 40, which amounted to a difference of 15 points from the original rater's score. As a result of this wide discrepancy, I considered this story an outlier and thus removed its score from my calculations, leaving 205 stories for comparison.

Among these 205 stories, eight were stories I rated as *5* (the highest rating), with an average rubric score of 34.4, and 12 were stories I rated as *4*, with an average score of 34.8. I rated 24 stories as *3* (average rubric score of 33.9), 69 stories as *2* (average rubric score of 28.3), and 96 stories as *1* (average rubric score of 25.9). As seen in Table 2, the average rubric scores for stories I rated highest were higher than the average scores for stories I rated at the middle level, and the average scores for those I rated at the lowest level were the lowest of all. This shows that my holistic ratings were relatively consistent with the trained raters' scores.

Table 2

Comparison of Holistic Rating and Rubric Scores

Holistic Rating Group	Number of Stories	Average Rubric Score
3, 4, & 5	44	34.2
2	65	28.3
1	96	25.9

Rurality Rating

In an effort to determine how these students, all of whom lived in rural places, demonstrated a connection to place in their narrative fiction writing, I assigned a "rurality rating" to their stories upon reading them for the second time. If the setting was decidedly not rural (e.g., New York City, ancient Egypt) and I did not detect anything that reflected a rural sense of place, I assigned a "*1*—not rural" rating to the story. If there was nothing in the story to suggest it took place in a rural setting, but there was also nothing to suggest it did *not* take place in a rural setting (e.g., a realistic fiction story that took place at "home," without an indication of where the home was located), I assigned a "*2*—not necessarily rural." To stories that made brief references to things of a rural nature (e.g., characters live near the woods), I assigned a rating of "*3*—rural indicators." If a story clearly took place in a rural setting (e.g., a farm), but the action did not fully center around things of a rural nature, I assigned a rating of "*4*—rural." With some stories, the events (e.g., a father/son hunting trip, #046, #077), setting (e.g., a horse barn, #092, #093), or characters (e.g., "Hillbilly Joe," #005) were distinctly rural, and for those stories, I assigned a "*5*—very rural" rating.

In a later round of coding, I read through the 20 stories that had been assigned a "very rural" rating with the goal of further stratifying the sample to include a "most rural" category. I noted ten stories which best exemplified students' representations of place and rurality, and I

assigned each of these a new, top rating of "*6*—most rural." The final totals for each rating were as follows:

- (1) Not rural = 44 stories
- (2) Not necessarily rural = 92 stories
- (3) Rural indicators = 44 stories
- (4) Rural = 37 stories
- (5) Very rural = 10 stories
- (6) Most rural = 10 stories

Taking the numbers for ratings of 3-6 together—all stories that reflected rurality in at least some small way, there were 102 stories, or 43% of the data set. Conversely, 57% of the stories did not contain references to rural places or anything I noted as being of a rural nature.

Table 3 shows the title, genre, holistic rating, and author gender for each of the top ten stories in terms of rurality. The stories are presented alphabetically; I did not rank them from 1-10. In Appendix H, I share a brief summary of each of these ten stories to illustrate how a connection to place was most clearly demonstrated among the stories in the data set.

Table 3

Top Ten Stories in Terms of Rurality Rating

Title	**Genre**	**Holistic Rating**	**Female Author**	**Male Author**
The Blizzard	Realistic fiction	3	√	
The Bridge	Realistic fiction (with magical/ supernatural elements)	4		√
*Cruise Ship Disaster**	Science fiction	4		√
Dew on the Horizon	Realistic fiction	4		√
Hillbilly Joe	Realistic fiction (with magical/supernatural elements)	2		√
The Hunting Story	Realistic fiction	1		√
My Lucky Day	Realistic fiction	5		√
The Mythical Forest	Realistic fiction	1		√
*The Raccoon Thief**	Realistic fiction	1		√
The Vines Come Alive	Realistic fiction (with magical/supernatural elements)	4		√

**To help with organization, I assigned titles to these stories (and to all 41 stories that were untitled).*

Data Analysis

Analyzing data in qualitative research is a recursive process that relies highly on intuition (Merriam, 1998). In this section, I articulate methods used to conduct a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to make meaning of the writing samples in terms of my research questions and theoretical viewpoint.

Descriptive and Narrative Coding

In a third round of coding, I reread the stories—this time grouped according to genre—going through each story line by line and assigning descriptive codes to continue making sense of the data. Because rich description is a goal of qualitative research generally (Merriam, 1998) and my study specifically, *descriptive coding*, which, according to Saldaña (2016, p. 102), "summarizes in a word or short phrase—most often a noun—the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data," was an appropriate choice for this stage of analysis. However, since one of my research questions asks about fourth graders' use of fiction writing elements, I also employed *narrative coding* (Saldaña, 2016, p. 155), which "applies the conventions of (primarily) literary elements and analysis to qualitative texts, most often in the form of stories." In other words, I noted instances of story elements such as conflict, foreshadowing, flashback, and resolution using narrative codes.

It is important to note that the purpose of coding in this study was not to simply ascribe descriptive labels to the data; rather, I viewed coding as "a method of discovery" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 42) that stimulated my thinking about the phenomenon of children's narrative fiction writing. Though the early-stage codes were fairly concrete in nature, the codes assigned in later iterations were more abstract and interpretive (Merriam, 1998). I continued writing analytic memos to help

me make coding decisions and document the coding process (Saldaña, 2016), and I continually referred back to the themes identified in my literature review to determine whether similar themes existed across the students' stories.

Creating a Codebook

After this round of coding, I created a codebook (Saldaña, 2016) to define and organize the codes, with the aim of "lumping" like ideas together and "splitting" categories with conceptually distinct ideas (p. 24). The codebook was refined upon future coding iterations, and I used it to unify the codes and categories established; I have included the final version of the codebook as Appendix I.

Next, I pulled evidence from the data pertaining to the various codes onto a new document, creating a coding table. For some codes (e.g., "Rural—Woods"), I simply recorded the assigned story number of each story that contained a reference to that code. For other codes (e.g., "Parents—Positive Depictions") I either copied and pasted lines of text under the code heading (e.g., "Because her father loved her so much, it hurt his heart to discipline her," #182), or wrote a brief description of why the code was used in conjunction with a particular story (e.g., *The mom is so loving when Toolup Blue forgets her lunch box—gives her a hug and kiss before getting on the bus,* #047).

Developing Themes

All of the steps described above are part of conducting a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which is a recursive process that does not occur in sequential steps (Petty et al., 2012). Instead, I used a *constant comparative* technique (Glaser, 1965; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to go back and forth among the different stories, coding tables, and memos to look for patterns and to refine my coding categories. LeCompte and Preissle (1994, p. 11) define constant

comparison as “a kind of inductive category coding in which the researcher simultaneously compares all items identified with all others so as to determine which ones belong together and which constitute new categories.”

I continued the sorting process until I ceased to make new insights upon rereading and regrouping the data. Then, having reached the saturation point, I re-examined the data, coding tables, and memos to develop themes.

Trustworthiness

In this section, I outline potential threats to the validity of my study and measures taken to establish trustworthiness, which is akin to ensuring reliability and validity in a quantitative study (Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 1998). In the previous sections, I described how I (a) compared my holistic ratings of students’ stories with the scores they received on the Promoting PLACE rubric and resolved discrepancies; and (b) continually wrote analytic (Saldaña, 2016) and reflexive (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019) memos, which then served as an “audit trail” (Guba, 1981) to keep track of decisions I made along the way and the rationale for those decisions. Descriptions of additional means of ensuring trustworthiness follow.

Drawing Reasonable Conclusions

With any qualitative study, which relies on the researcher-as-instrument, there is a risk that the investigator may draw conclusions that do not seem logical to other readers. To prevent that threat, I provided “depiction in enough detail to show that [my] conclusion ‘makes sense’” (Firestone, 1987, p. 19). Further, one keen advantage to writing a doctoral dissertation is that I was able to share my thoughts and conclusions with my dissertation advisor, who, because of her established expertise in rurality and place (Azano, 2011; Azano et al., 2017a; Azano & Biddle, 2019), gifted education (Azano, 2014; Callahan, Moon, Oh, Azano, & Hailey, 2015), and writing

instruction (Ruday & Azano, 2014, 2019) was able to redirect me if my conclusions seemed less than reasonable.

Generalizability

Though generalizability to similar situations is not an inherent goal of qualitative research (Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 1998), readers—especially those with influence over curricular decisions—like to be able to envision how the conclusions provided might be applied to other cases (Miles et al., 2014). To help facilitate this envisioning, I provided thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) throughout the research report.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity, or "the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher, the 'human as instrument'" (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, p. 278) is an essential part of any qualitative study. Berger (2015, p. 220) defined reflexivity as "a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of the researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgment and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome." Continuous memo writing was the primary means by which I attempted to maintain reflexivity throughout the project.

Researcher Subjectivity

Because the students whose writing I examined were residents of rural areas and were identified as high-ability learners, it is important to address my own relationships with these concepts as they no doubt affected my interpretation of the stories. First, while I never received special training in serving gifted students, I did refer several of my former students for consideration for gifted services, which my own children now receive at their respective schools and in which I also participated as a young student. Second, the students whose writing I examined were all residents of rural places, and since I analyzed their use of place in their

writing, it is important to note that I have only ever lived in cities and suburbs, so I approached students' representations of place from an outsider's perspective (Bailey, 2007). As such, there was a chance I may have misunderstood references to place in the students' writing, and to reduce this threat to trustworthiness, my dissertation advisor and a research assistant for the Promoting PLACE project, who are both from rural communities and who have visited the project sites frequently, reviewed my identifications of rurality and place.

While conducting my analysis, I will attempt to "bridle" (Dahlberg, 2006) my preconceptions about rurality and gifted education, which included idyllic images (e.g., scenic views, pleasantly slow pace of life) coupled with the awareness that rural people often struggle to find meaningful, well-paid work and can sometimes value tradition to the point that change and diversity are staunchly resisted. By bridling, I mean that I set them aside to allow for a broader view of both concepts while also acknowledging the ways in which they inevitably influenced my interpretations of data. Continually writing both analytic and reflexive memos helped me stay attuned to my own reactions to the data and the analysis process as it progressed.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I described my affiliation with the constructivist and critical theory paradigms; presented a rationale for using a content analysis study design; shared the research design model I used to construct my study; explained my access to the larger research study from which data were drawn; detailed data description and analysis procedures; and shared the efforts I made to ensure trustworthiness. In the following chapter, I present a thick description of the data set to reveal students' use of various elements of fiction, the themes that permeated their stories, and the ways in which they reflected a sense of connectedness to place.

Chapter Four

Describing and Cataloguing the Data

To create thematic understandings from the vast amount of data, it was first necessary to take a deep dive into students' stories to provide the information needed to answer my primary research question,

> What can an analysis of narrative fiction stories written by rural fourth graders taught using a place-based language arts curriculum reveal about the possibilities for elementary writing instruction?

In this chapter, I zoom in closely to provide a thick description (Geertz, 1973) of the data to support claims I will later make in light of my theoretical framework, comprised of Vygotsky's (1971) theory of creativity, his sociocultural theory (1978), and Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy (see Figure 1). In the first section, I describe the data set in terms of different story genres used, the points of view employed, the protagonists featured, the inclusion of dialogue, the differing lengths of the stories, and information about whether the stories were typed or illustrated. In the second section, I describe the common story themes found in the data (e.g., parent/child relationships, bullying, literature references). In the third section, I describe common story elements used by student writers (e.g., language play, characterization, story devices). Finally, I describe students' references to rurality and place in the fourth section.

Then, in Chapter Five, I will discuss findings related to the following sub-questions:

- What elements of narrative fiction writing can fourth graders use successfully?
- How do rural fourth graders demonstrate a connection to place in their narrative fiction writing?

In Chapter Six, I will take an even broader view to discuss the implications of these findings as they relate to the possibilities for elementary writing instruction.

Description of the Data Set

Genre

Students were free to choose the type of narrative fiction story they wanted to write, and I classified the stories according to genre. Table 4 shows the definition of genre I used and the number of stories belonging to each genre, ordered by frequency of occurrence. I started with definitions found in the curriculum (those marked with an asterisk), but I realized the need to make further distinctions based on trends present in the data set. For example, because place is such an important part of this research, I needed to distinguish between fantasy stories that took place in fantastical settings ("Fantasy") and those that had fantastical elements but took place in realistic settings, which I coded as "Realistic Fiction (with magical/supernatural elements)."

Table 4

Genre Descriptions and Number of Stories Per Genre

Genre	Description	# of stories
General realistic fiction*	Stories about events and characters that are true to life	72
Fantasy*	A genre of fiction characterized by fanciful or supernatural elements	32
Adventure*	Stories about events that happen outside the characters' ordinary lives, usually involving danger and action	24
Science fiction*	A literary genre in which fantasy, typically based on speculative scientific discoveries or developments, environmental changes, space travel, or life on other planets, forms a part of the plot or background	21
Fairy tale	Stories that include royal characters, medieval elements, and/or similarities with classic fairy tales	16
Realistic fiction (with magical/supernatural elements)	Stories set in realistic places where a supernatural or magical event occurs or a magical character is present	15

Realistic fiction (with animal characters)	Stories that are true to life, except that animals are personified and/or events are told from an animal's perspective	11
Horror	Stories that include blood, gore, extreme violence, terror, and/or murder	11
Mystery	Stories that include a mysterious event that must be solved	11
Historical fiction*	Stories about fictional characters/events in a historical setting	8
Superhero	Stories that include heroic characters with super-human powers who usually rescue someone in a precarious position	7
Video game	Stories set in the world of a video game	6
Ghost story	Stories that include ghosts, intended to be suspenseful and/or scary	3

At times, it was difficult to place stories within genres because they contained elements typical of multiple genres. For example, Story #198 is about a family cat, Pizza, who keeps stealing the family's pizza. The setting, characters, and events all suggest it should be placed firmly in the Realistic Fiction genre—except, toward the end of the story, the family's new dog startles Pizza, and "It was so loud our elf poofed away." This elf had not been introduced and it only appears in this one sentence, but its presence as a mythical creature caused me to code this story as "Realistic Fiction (with magical/supernatural elements)." I made a different decision with Story #038, which fit the Fantasy genre in every way except that a note at the beginning said it took place in the year 8064, indicating it might belong in the Science Fiction category. But, since nothing else in the story implied a futuristic setting, I coded it as Fantasy. In early rounds of coding, I noted multiple genres into which the stories might fit if more than one seemed applicable, but to decide on the final genre codes (only one per story), I used my best judgment and kept memos recording my deliberations.

Point of View

Seventy-one stories were written in first person perspective, which is when the narrator is a character in the story (i.e., the pronoun "I" is used to refer to the narrator), and 150 stories were written in third person perspective, which is when the narrator is not a character in the story (i.e., the pronouns "she," "he," or "they" are used to refer to the characters). Seven students wrote in second person; interestingly, all of the students who wrote stories from the second person perspective (i.e., "you" refers to a character in the story) were taught by the same teacher, which suggests she emphasized it more than other teachers. Nine stories used a shifting perspective (i.e., they referred to the protagonist as "I" in some places and sometimes as "he" or "she").

Protagonists

Among the stories, 189 featured humans as protagonists, 23 featured animals as protagonists, 15 featured mythical creatures as protagonists, and six stories featured superheroes as protagonists. Four stories each featured a robot, a pencil, an alien, and a pumpkin as protagonists. For the most part, girls wrote stories featuring female protagonists and boys wrote stories featuring male protagonists. In 32 stories, the gender of the protagonist was not revealed; there were multiple protagonists of both genders in 14 stories; and there were 15 stories for which the author's gender information was missing. Among the 176 stories where there was one protagonist of specified gender, girls wrote from the perspective of the opposite gender three times as often as boys (18 to 6), but primarily when the protagonist was an animal (see Table 5).

Table 5

Gender of Protagonist and Whether the Protagonist was Human, Animal, or Mythical Creature by Gender of Author

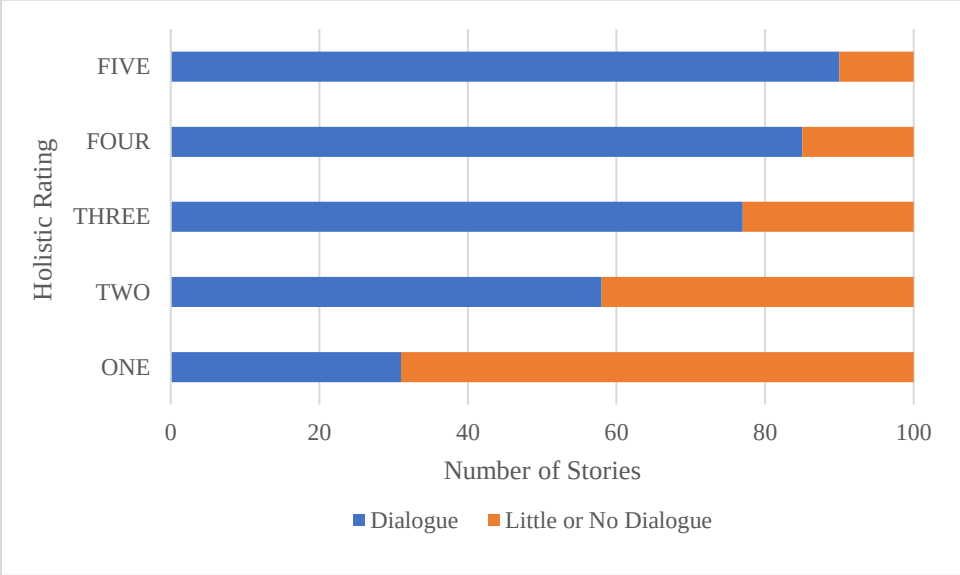
Protagonist Gender → / Author Gender ↓	Female (Human)	Male (Human)	Female (Animal)	Male (Animal)	Female (Mythical Creature)	Male (Mythical Creature)	Female (Other)	Male (Other)
Female	**67**	**10**	**5**	**8**	**7**	--	--	--
Male	**5**	**61**	**1**	**5**	--	**4**	--	**3**

Dialogue

The curriculum states that dialogue "helps us see why characters act in certain ways" (Lesson 6). Of the 237 stories, 64 did not incorporate any dialogue, 51 stories incorporated just one or two lines of dialogue, and 122 stories used dialogue throughout. Figure 4 shows a comparison between story quality (holistic rating from 1-5) and dialogue use. Stories rated higher in quality were much more likely to contain dialogue than stories rated lower in quality.

Figure 4

Relationship Between Dialogue Use and Holistic Quality Rating



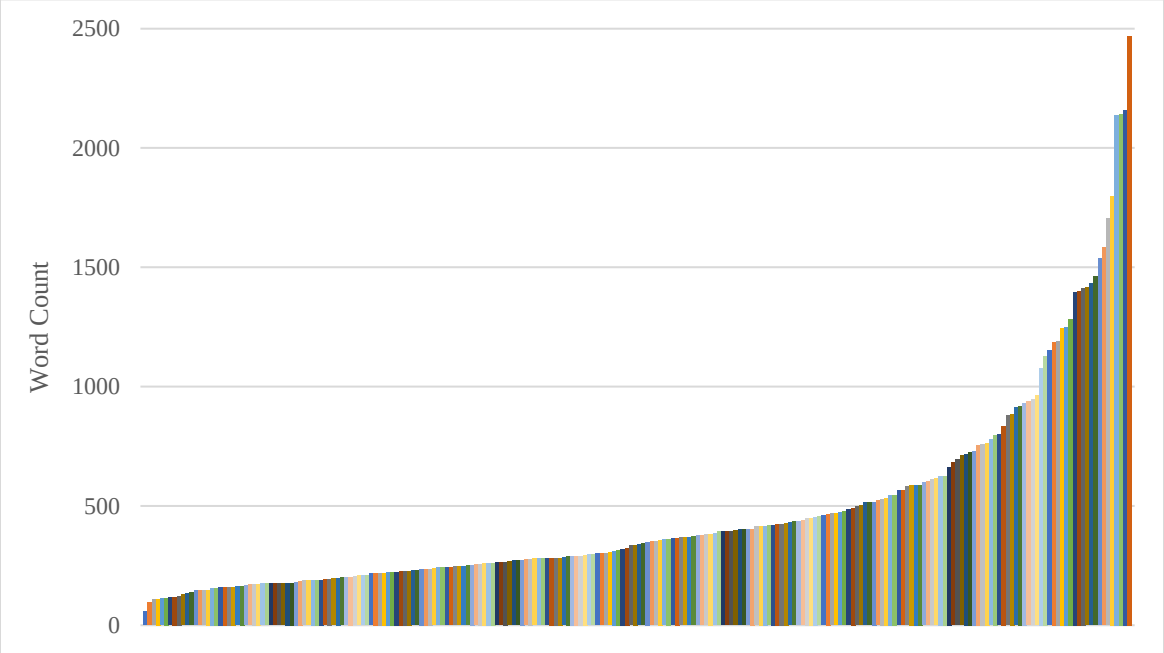
Length

The stories ranged in length from 57 words to 2,469 words. The median word count was 336 words, and the length of 104 stories fell within 100 words of the median (236-436 words). Sixty-six stories were fewer than 236 words, and 67 stories were longer than 436 words. I mention these numbers to highlight the wide disparity of story lengths in the data set. Since only about a quarter of the stories were over 436 words, it is really quite astounding that several

stories (#074, #098, #104, #128) were over 2,000 words long. Figure 5 depicts the word counts across the data set from least to greatest.

Figure 5

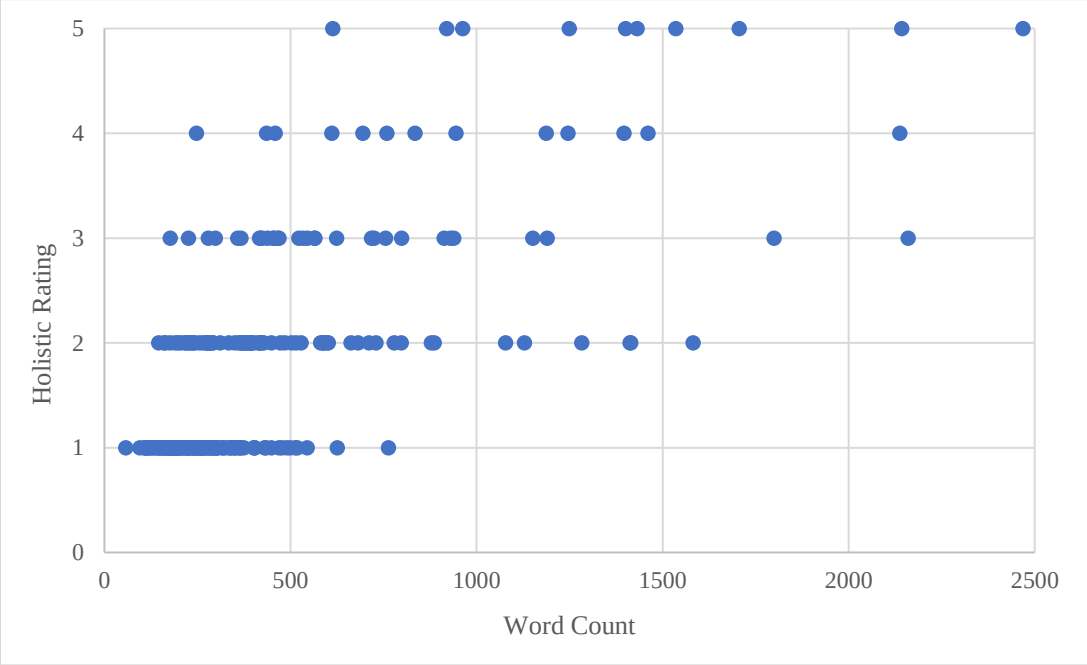
Number of Words Per Story (Least to Greatest)



When I first began reading the stories, I tried to avoid the assumption that longer stories were inherently better. Yet, I did find that across the data set, I tended to assign higher ratings to longer stories. In fact, in comparison with the overall average word count of 336, the average word count among the top ten stories in terms of holistic quality was 1,433, with a range of 614 to 2,469 (see Table 1, p. 68). Figure 6 shows the relationship between story length and holistic rating.

Figure 6

Word Count and Holistic Rating



Typing vs. Handwriting

For consistency, I needed to type every story myself, but I made note of which stories had been typed originally (55 stories) and which stories were handwritten (182 stories), according to student and teacher preference. I wanted to see if a difference in quality existed between the typed and handwritten stories. The average holistic rating of the handwritten stories was 1.6 (out of 5) and the average rating of the typed stories was 2.7 (out of 5). One possible reason for this higher average rating is that students may have written a first draft by hand, then typed a more formal version on the computer, which would have constituted an additional round of revision. Another possible reason could be that the more "open" spatial feeling of an ongoing Word document would not have been as limiting as writing on paper, when students may have felt inclined to stop at the end of a page, especially if they were using certain writing templates that provided room for pictures as were used by some of the student writers. (Note: The use of word

processing software would have also improved spelling due to autocorrect and spellcheck features, but I did not evaluate the stories in terms of quality until after I had typed them, correcting any spelling mistakes as I went along.)

Illustrations

The curriculum instructed teachers not to provide time during the lessons for students to illustrate their stories or to design a cover, but it suggested that students could be invited to work on illustrations at home. Looking at data from each school separately, I was able to ascertain that some teachers did provide class time for illustrations (not necessarily taking away from time allotted for teaching the curriculum) because all students who had those teachers illustrated their stories or used a certain template. Again, I was curious if there might be a difference in holistic quality based on whether, and how, children illustrated their stories, so I made note of that as well. In all, 123 students included no illustrations with their stories and 62 students just illustrated the cover (an additional six students used photographs on the cover). Seventeen stories included illustrations throughout, and two stories added just one or two illustrations. Interestingly, there were three stories that were illustrated by the same teacher's aide (the same "About the Illustrator" section was included with each), and there were four more stories that were illustrated by someone other than the author (even though the names on the cover were blocked out, I could tell that the first and last names of the author and illustrator did not line up). At one school, all six students (plus four students at another school in the same district) used a certain booklet template, and at another school, all 9 students used a writing template designed for primary students (half of the first page is taken up with a box for illustration and the lines for writing are spaced very widely).

Notably, all ten stories that used the booklet template were rated as "1," and of the nine stories written using the primary-grade writing form, the average rating was 1.3. All seven stories illustrated by someone other than the author were rated 3 or higher, with an average of 3.7. The average rating for the 15 stories that were illustrated throughout, presumably by the author, was 2.1; the average rating for stories that just had a cover illustration or photo was 2.0; and the average rating for stories that were not illustrated was 1.9. Therefore, it seems the only factors that negatively affected story quality were the use of the booklet template and primary-grade writing form, and for some reason, having someone else illustrate the story affected the quality positively.

Common Story Themes

In this section, I detail the story themes that occurred repeatedly across the data and the ways in which they were manifested. Themes included Personal Relationships (with Parents, Siblings, Grandparents, Pets, and Teachers), Bullying, Heroism, Death/Violence, Race, Religion, Sports, Teenage Life, Technology, and Literature References. Themes of Rurality and Place will be discussed later in the chapter.

Parent/Child Relationships

Family relationships played an important part in a vast majority of the stories, and parents were depicted or referenced in 110 of the 237 stories in various ways. In several stories (e.g., #062, #064, #067, #074 #131, #224), the mother and father are depicted as a strong, functional parenting team. There are many stories in which only one parent is mentioned (e.g., #047, #048, #068, #089, #092, #182, #186, #198, #213) or in which one parent takes a larger role than the other (e.g., #017, #098, #100, #188). Four stories (#013, #095, #182, #185) mention that one parent had passed away prior to the start of the story; three stories (#063, #183, #229) mention

that both parents had passed away, and one story (#003) mentions that the sister and brother protagonists were abandoned as infants. None of the stories feature same-sex couples as parents.

Parents in Powerful Positions. In multiple stories, the parents are depicted as having powerful roles within the community. Stories #015 and #016 each feature the parents as Greek gods; Stories #063, #131, #140, and #182 feature royal parents; the father in Story #148 is the president of the United States; and leadership of Mousetown passes from parent to child across generations in Story #232.

Depictions of Loving Parent/Child Relationships. In the majority of the stories featuring parent/child relationships, the bond between the two parties is strong, and parents act in very loving ways toward their children. In many stories, parents act as caretakers by making pancakes for birthdays and sleepovers (#055, #070), packing children's lunches (#004, #047), driving them to and from school (#053, #131), providing clean laundry (#067), cleaning the family home (#224), and preparing dinner (#069, #200, #123, #218). In other stories, parents take children on vacations (#120, #132, #215, #216), on fishing and hunting trips (#046, #077, #218), to dance competitions (#217), and out for ice cream (#017, #071, #128).

Parents play an important role when it comes to resolving the conflicts that arise in the stories. For example, Story #128 centers around twin girls who work for weeks to grow sunflowers to give to their beloved mother for Mother's Day, and when one of the flowers fails to grow, the mom swiftly solves the problem by taking the girls and their baby sister to the store to buy new seeds and treating everyone to ice cream on the way home. In Story #186, after vain Chloe tries a magical face cream that is purported to reveal the user's inner beauty, she transforms into "a big, ugly monster." Chloe's mother gently suggests, "If you want to be beautiful on the outside again, then you are going to have to change the way you are on the

inside. You will have to work for it, because sometimes, you haven't been so nice." Instead of lashing out or defending herself, Chloe accepts responsibility and calls two friends to apologize for her past behavior, showing that she respects her mother's opinion and cares about making things right. Similarly, in Story #198, after Cayley runs out of ingredients to make more of the magic potion that had caused her classmates to like her, Cayley's mom helps her realize that true friendships cannot be bought, even with magic potions: "Cayley smiled and a feeling of contentment filled her heart. She knew that her mom was right and that she'd always be there for her." Many additional stories depict children going to their parents for help with various problems (e.g., #064, #086, #120, #133, #145, #229, #237).

Role Reversals. In some of the stories, parents adhere to traditional gender roles, with the father going off to work or to hunt while the mother stays at home with young children (e.g., #033, #077, #128). Other stories describe both parents working (#072, #074) and the mothers as having jobs outside the home without mentioning a father's job (e.g., #068, #094, #115); there is one story in which the mother takes her children fishing (#218). The mother is the hero of Story #017 while the father is a minor character, and a few stories depict fathers as nurturers (e.g., #040, #055).

Several stories feature children who save their parents from a dangerous or deadly predicament, as in Story #028, when a daughter pushes her father out of the path of a "Sharknado"; Story #044, when a daughter frees her parents from false imprisonment at the hands of her evil uncle; Story #162, when a child rescues the entire family during a house fire; and Story #081, where a daughter rounds up reinforcements to save her mother from a witch. In Story #104, Bootsy (a kitten) insists on keeping her mother company during her banishment in a

cage, and Story #075 ends with the children setting off on their own to avoid capture by the bad guys they had all just defeated together.

Jesse, the protagonist in Story #115, keeps her little sister out of their mom's room so she can sleep after a long day's work, and on Christmas Eve, Jesse goes out to buy stockings for the family. "Then she came home and went to bed, and through the night, Santa came and gave them presents." It is unclear whether the protagonist—or the author, for that matter—believes in Santa Claus, and whether it was the mom, Jesse, or someone else who actually put the gifts in the children's stockings cannot be determined. Regardless, Jesse felt the need to ensure that at least the stockings themselves were purchased in time, and the way the author phrased the following exchange of dialogue (spoken on Christmas Eve morning) implies Jesse did not tell her mother she was planning to do this:

> Jesse said, "Will you get home early tonight?"
>
> Mom replies, "Maybe, let me check with my boss. But why?"
>
> "Because . . . because I want to go out [with] friends" (#115).

Another parent/child role reversal takes place in the kingdom of Unicorpia (Story #048), where a unicorn mother, Majesta, and a fairy mother, Namil, had been best friends until a controversy over a spilled drink launches an epic feud between the two. Toward the end of the story, while the moms are engaged in a raging battle, their children hold a reasoned discussion about how to put a stop to the fighting. Afterward, the children stop their mothers and "explained why [their fight] made no sense and told everyone that they can't fight over a little argument forever." They urge their mothers to apologize, which they do, then "they all lived happily ever after as best friends."

Depictions of Tensions Within Parent/Child Relationships. Some of the stories depict parents as rule-enforcers who, at times, get in the way of something their children want to do. In

story #107, for example, Kloe feels a sudden urge to go exploring in the woods, but her "hopes" are "crushed" when her mom insists she finish her chores first. In a similar story (#066), Julie meets a fairy in the woods who demands she return in the middle of night, but Julie's stepmother forbids it and the two proceed to argue. In Story #126, the mother of twins Starr and Skye shouts at them for waking up their baby sister, whom she has finally gotten to sleep: "Mom made Dad take Mya into another room so she wouldn't scare her when she yelled at us. . . . Starr needed a couple of minutes to get her hearing back." Amanda's mother, in Story #119, folds her arms to indicate her seriousness when she makes Amanda go across to the neighbors' house to apologize for the rude way she had spoken to them earlier.

Other stories reflect a tension wherein children feel powerless about big decisions affecting their families. For example, in Story #074, Crissy's parents announce that the family will be moving to Los Angeles in just a few days but refuse to give an explanation as to why: "'Just know we're moving Friday,' said Dad. 'Today is Wednesday. We have almost two days to pack the boxes,' said Mom." Similarly, the narrator for Story #156 lets the reader know that Sally's parents "have made the decision to move," clearly placing ownership of that decision outside Sally's control. In Story #087, the protagonist feels immense pressure from his father, the middle school football coach, to play on the football team even though he's "basically known as a nerd" due to his love of science and corresponding ambivalence about the sport. The protagonist in Story #173 faces a similar struggle between her desires and her parents' expectations, as evidenced in the story's opening lines: "Once there was a little girl who wanted to be an astronaut. She loved space and all that was in it. Her parents said, 'Girls can't go in space.'" Likewise, when Emma's cherished puppy, Dream, is found deceased on the side of the road in Story #194, Emma cries for days, but eventually broaches the subject of getting another

dog. Her mother replies, “No. Because when you get a new pet, it is like you are replacing your first one. Why don’t you just think about it and if you still want to, we will get you a new dog.” Though she technically leaves the decision up to Emma, her mother’s words make Emma feel so guilty that she never gets another pet. In another story (#117), after Jack’s parents laugh at him and refuse to take action when he sees a “dark figure” outside his window at night, their dog is viciously attacked: “We found it furless in spots and there were bruises. I started to cry.” Had the parents listened to their son, the attack could have been prevented.

Six stories depict a level of dysfunction in the parent/child relationship that goes way beyond tension. Stories #013 and #031, for example, each feature fathers who kill or attempt to kill the child’s mother, and Story #036 features an evil king who tries to kill his son by pushing him “into the infinite abyss” as part of his ambition to rule the world. The situation is reversed in Story #084 when the “Queen Bee” mother plots to kill the bee father. A cruel couple kidnaps twins Ava and Thomas in Story #042 and raises them as their own, and the protagonist in Story #125, a Cinderella retelling, endures an evil stepmother just like the one in the original fairy tale. The protagonist in Story #130 has conflicting feelings toward his mother, who treats him relatively well but is abusive toward his adopted sister, and he ends up leaving home to find the sister after she runs away. During a battle scene where he is fighting a dragon, the boy suddenly says, “I miss my mom!” which seems contradictory in light of her extremely poor treatment of his sister, whom she recently told to “get out of [her] face and never show her ugly face in the house ever again.”

Surprising Revelations About Parents. Five stories involve the child protagonist finding out something surprising about his or her parents. For example, the four siblings in Story #060 discover their long-lost father is the king of an alien planet. The daughter in Story #143,

Allie, discovers that her father had been friends with mermaids in his childhood, and Sea, the daughter in Story #229, finds out that her real mother was once a mermaid queen. Mary O. Ward, the protagonist of Story #234, finds out the man she has always known as her father is not really her biological father, and she meets the man who is actually related to her in that way.

Unusual Parental Decisions. In multiple stories, the parents act in ways that are oddly agreeable or permissive. In two stories, parents give permission for children to attend a birthday party (#234) or sleepover (#055) at someone's home when the child has just met them that day. In Story #122, Emily asks her parents if she can go off to explore a far-away castle with her elf, and they reply, "'Sure, just be back in time for dinner!'" In fact, they have no problem with the fact that Emily returns with an old man she encountered at the castle, and they let her play with the man and the elf "all evening until they fell asleep." Similarly, when Kate and Olivia hear that the emperor is forcing everyone to leave Paris in Story #118, Kate's mom agrees to let them make a long journey to his residence to ask him to stop. Also, although Maria's grandmother (Story #133) had repeatedly refused to let Maria speak to her friends on the phone after their family moved away because she feared it would make her miss them too much, she dramatically reverses course by agreeing to let Maria spend a week in Las Vegas with the same friends.

In three stories, parents quickly agree to let other children move in with them without seeming to give it a second thought. For example, when two girls from "history" appear in front of Brook after having teleported during a thunderstorm, Brook takes them home and, after a few nights and a brief explanation of their circumstances, Brook's mother agrees to let them live in their home permanently (#102). Even more strangely, a boy working as a dishwasher is surprised when a "homeless kid" emerges from the sink drain at the restaurant, but when he takes the boy home with him, his mother agrees to adopt him almost immediately (#159). When Penelope and

her former bully, Daisy, make the surprise discovery that they are long-lost twins in Story #100, they ask Daisy's mother if Daisy can move in with Penelope's family, and she replies, "'Of COURSE!'"

Sibling Relationships

Depictions of Positive Sibling Relationships. Siblings were depicted or referenced in 42 of the 237 stories in various ways. In some stories (e.g., #059, #107, #229), the protagonist's siblings are mentioned, but the relationship is not elaborated upon, and in other stories, very loving relationships among siblings are portrayed. For example, Story #064 is an account of the hand injury sustained by the narrator's sister, Brinlee, during a visit to relatives. Afterwards, Brinlee is "very worried that she wouldn't be able to throw a softball or practice batting with her hand the way it [is], but," the narrator writes with pride and admiration, "she is the toughest kid I know" (#064). When the protagonist from Story #077 is getting ready for his hunting trip, his baby brother asks if he can go along, but he is not old enough yet. When the protagonist returns, he writes, "I went over to give my mom a hug, but my brother got to me first. He jumped off the couch and on my back."

When describing his siblings in his story about Knight School (#131), George writes, "Now I know all family members love each other, but I feel like mine have this bond, you know. Anyway, what I'm trying to say is I just love them so much." Also very affectionate towards her sister is Emma from Story #194, who learns she is going to be a big sister on her fourth birthday, and as soon as the baby is born, they become "best friends at first sight." In Story #183, princess sisters Tanasia and Emma also share a close bond, and in Story #204, Maria cries tears of joy when she is reunited with her brother, Jack, after returning from the ghost world to which she had inadvertently traveled.

In several stories, an older sibling plays a caretaking, protective role toward a younger one (e.g., #051, #100, #115). In other stories, siblings are close in spite of the conflicts that arise between them. For example, siblings Crissy and Cameron fight viciously over a chocolate bar in one scene, but when Crissy is nervous about starting out at her new school, Cameron assures her, "I am always going to be there for you no matter what."

Depictions of Strained Sibling Relationships. There are only a few stories in which the sibling relationship is depicted as especially strained or volatile and things are not worked out in the end. The action that occurs in Story #111, for example, arises when Eliza collides with her "mean sister, Evie," in the hallway at school and loses consciousness. When she wakes up to discover everything that happened to her in the Minecraft world was just a dream, she does not make up with Evie, whom she refers to throughout the story as her "enemy." The struggle between the twins featured in Story #038 emanates from a prophecy that decreed "good" Jamie had to stay alive until "evil" Jane repented. The conflict had been ongoing for over a thousand years, and the story ends with Jane locking Jamie in a dungeon and him begging her to change her ways. In another fantastical story (#003), twins Farkas and Lucy do not get along. Lucy calls Farkas "boring and depressing," while Farkas characterizes Lucy's constant cheerfulness as "creepy." Story #109 features a journey taken by five-year-old twins Kate and Kane, who get along well, and their six-year-old sister, Lora, who is perpetually grouchy despite the others' efforts to cheer her up. And, similar to *The Queen Bee* fairy tale students read during the Fiction unit (Grimm & Grimm, 1886; Lesson 11), twin sisters Lucy and Lily from Story #063 are juxtaposed as good (Lucy is very kind to everyone they encounter while helping the lost prince find his way back to his castle) and evil (Lily yells at a beggar woman and kicks a hurt wolf along the way).

Twins. These fourth-grade writers—especially the girls—seemed to have a fascination with twins. Fifteen sets of twins were featured across 13 stories, and there were a few more instances (e.g., Eliza and Evie, #111; Farkas and Lucy, #003) where the siblings seemed like they might have been twins but were not explicitly described as such. Of the thirteen stories featuring twins, 11 were written by girls, and in the only two written by boys (#076 and #131), the twins were minor characters who did not play a prominent role in the story. Nine pairs of twins were girls, and six pairs of twins were of mixed gender; the only pair of male twins in the data set were minor characters mentioned in Story #076. Twelve of the 15 sets of twins had rhyming (e.g., Hailey and Bailey, #137; Pam and Sam, #131) or alliterative (e.g., Marine and Marie, #098; Kate and Kane, #109) names. Endearingly, the author of the story about Audrey and Aubrey (#128) included an "Author's Note" revealing she is a twin in real life, which indicates that some of the writers used the fiction-writing unit to explore concepts of personal significance. (In fact, because Story #126 also features twin sisters (Starr and Skye) who have a baby sister at home, and because student codes indicate the two stories were written by children at the same school, it occurs to me that the author of Story #126 might have been the other author's twin.)

Although most of the stories depict twins in a positive light, Story #119, titled *I Hate Those Twins,* centers around the protagonist's extreme distaste for twins. When Amanda moves to a new neighborhood and finds twins Billy and Lilly playing on their front porch, Amanda, who "never liked twins when she was younger," whispers to herself, "'I hate those twins and I always will." She reluctantly agrees to play with them when they invite her over, but soon runs away screaming. Amanda's mother forces her to go back and apologize, which she does by

saying, "'I'm so sorry for what I did but I don't want to be your friend.'" Luckily (if strangely), "the twins were happy" and "the whole story ended happily ever after."

Relationships with Grandparents

Six stories featured grandparents as characters, but in three of those (#138, #168, #174), grandparents were only mentioned briefly and they did not play a significant role in the story. In Story #133, though, it is Maria's "mean" grandmother who prevents her from talking to her friends on the phone after the family moves away, even though Maria's mother is also present in the story. In Story #059, Stacy resists going to the library with her friend because she does not want to run into her "embarrassing" grandma there, but when they do end up there and see her grandma, it does not appear Stacy is particularly embarrassed. The most prominent role played by a grandparent is found in Story #190, when a boy, Gabriel, is devastated after his "Mamaw" is killed in a car crash: "He refused to eat, sleep, or even play his favorite video game. They tried ice cream, hot dogs, and just talking to him, but nothing would cheer him up." After several days, Gabriel's Mamaw comes to visit him, seemingly as a ghost. She tells him, "'Yes, it's me. I missed you. I came to say I am happy.'" Presumably, his Mamaw is in heaven, and the story ends with Gabriel reuniting with her twenty years later when he "passed."

Relationships with Other Adults

Many of the stories take place in a school setting and therefore include interactions with teachers, principals, school nurses, and coaches. For the most part, these characters stay in the background, serving primarily to facilitate classwork (#128, #131, #198), to care for students after injuries sustained at school (#102, #111, #133), or to act as someone to whom protagonists can report problems (#004, #047, #086, #178, #210). Teachers play a more significant role in only four stories (#097, #137, #173, #200). First, after the protagonist's parents tell her she

cannot become an astronaut due to her gender (#173), a "college teacher" asks about her goals. The teacher is surprised to hear what the parents had said, and because "she had to help," she lies, saying, "'Well, I'm a girl and I was in space.' The teacher knew she was lying to a little girl, but it was for good." I found it interesting that the author came up with this—a well-meaning lie from a caring teacher—as the solution to the story's problem, because it would have been just as easy to invent a female professor who *had* actually gone into space. Perhaps, in the writer's mind, it was more noble for the teacher to break her moral code for the sake of a child's future than if she had really been an astronaut. Sure enough, the teacher's words inspired the girl to pursue her dreams, and she eventually started her own "girl space program," where she triumphantly denies access to a man who had previously rejected her on the basis of sex: "'You're a man. You don't know anything about space.'"

Two other stories with significant roles for teachers cast those teachers in a negative light, especially Story #097, where Mr. Bob Antonio, the protagonist's teacher, actually turns out to be a supervillain and the story's antagonist. Similarly, in Story #137, an evil preschool teacher, Ms. Debbie, locks the door after the parents leave and turns the classroom into the House of Deboria, where the children are hypnotized and forced to clean and "do everything she commands."

Story #200 depicts more nuanced relationships between Tiana, a girl going through a hard time, and the adults in her life. At the beginning of the story, Tiana makes herself late for school by refusing to get out of bed. When the teacher makes a comment about her disheveled look, Tiana snaps back in anger and is sent to the principal's office. The principal also remarks on her odd appearance, and when Tiana responds sarcastically, she finds herself in even more trouble:

> I stormed out of the room and headed to the principal's office. Mrs. Thomas was just hanging up the phone, then looked up at me. "Tiana, what on Earth are you wearing!?"
>
> "Well, I woke up late and had to throw on some clothes. Mom wouldn't let me change. There's your explanation," I explained, throwing my hands up. I plopped down in my seat miserably.
>
> "Don't you take that tone with me," the principal commanded. The principal blabbered on and on about how what I did was wrong, and I would have to be in detention for it the next day. (#200)

This incident is the last straw for Tiana's mother, who must come right back to school and take Tiana home for the rest of the day. At home, her mother starts researching Boot Camps for troubled children, and she drops her off at one the following morning. There, Tiana meets "Major," a teacher who does not tolerate her noncompliance. After standing "slumped over" in line and screaming back at Major upon being corrected, Tiana is forced to do fifty push-ups, and with her "arms feeling like Jell-O" and like she "would collapse any minute," Tiana decides she is ready to apologize, and does so humbly. The apology is accepted, but Major tells her to "consider this your warning." With that experience, and with some positive attention from her new roommates, Tiana does manage to stop behaving badly.

Importance of Pets

Pets appear in many of the stories. Ten stories feature cats, 23 stories feature dogs, and six stories feature other animals (three horses, a bunny, a wolf, and a parrot) as pets. Five of the stories (#006, #008, #009, #104, #203) are told from the animal's perspective. Story #203, for example, is about a puppy waiting to be adopted from the animal shelter but not wanting to be separated from her brother. Several of the stories completely revolve around the protagonist's experiences with a pet. For example, Story #196 is purely a description of a day that a boy, Fred, spends with his beloved dog, Dip-N-Dots—they play outside together, then come inside to snuggle up, watch TV, and eventually fall asleep. Story #189 is all about a family's attempt to

get their cat, Pizza, to stop stealing their pizza. In two stories (#019, #132), the pet is described as being the protagonist's only friend, and in two other stories (#051, #070), a child's unhappy birthday is greatly improved when she receives a new pet as a surprise gift. Though there are a few stories that merely mention a pet without elaboration (e.g., #096, #100, #197), in nearly every story featuring pets, the relationship between human and pet is depicted as positive and rewarding; there are no stories in which a pet is portrayed negatively in the data set.

Bullying

As incidences of bullying were noted in 41 of the 237 stories, bullying appears to be the most common source of conflict in the data. Some of the descriptions of bullying are painful to read, such as in Story #004, when Alexander starts the school year determined to stand up to "those flame-haired bullies," Titan and Bryon, but they continue to harass him relentlessly, eventually beating him up to the point that he has to miss a month of school. In Story #102, a gang of four bullies knocks the protagonist unconscious with absolutely no provocation, and in Story #132, "The same group of kids beat [Ruby] up every day and she always came home with a bloody nose or with a limp." In Story #198, a new girl in school targets Cayley for no reason whatsoever:

> "Class, we have a new student. This is Carley." Cayley looked up at Carley and she looked at her in disgust.
>
> "Oh no," Cayley thought. "Just someone else to bully me."
>
> After class, she walked down the hallway to put up her books before the next class. Carley walked up and slammed the locker in her face. *BAM!* [Cayley's] face turned blood red and she yelled in an angry voice, "What was that for?"
>
> Carley threw her hand on her hip with some sass, rolled her eyes, and then walked away. . . . The rest of the day, Cayley thought about how she hated being treated so badly by everyone at school. (#198)

Frankie, the protagonist in Story #094, moves to a new town because her father died and her mother could not find a job where they used to live. Inexplicably, a girl at Frankie's new school bullies her by making jokes about her newly-deceased father. Interestingly, the narrator turns to directly to the reader for help: "*Frankie is new. What should we do [when] Emily talks bad to her?"* Clearly, the issue of bullying is pervasive among the thoughts of these fourth-grade writers.

Taking Action Against Bullies. In Story #240, Bob, a new student in school, witnesses a group of bullies bothering other kids, including his new friend, Jacob. Bob intervenes, but he is pushed down and badly beaten. Later that day, he meets a retired soldier and asks if he would train him. The soldier agrees, and they spend weeks running, swimming, doing push-ups, and using punching bags to make Bob stronger. The next time he sees the bullies bothering Jacob, he is able to stop them, and they never bother the two friends—or anyone else—again.

In a less-realistic story, the teenagers who are being bothered by two bullies in Story #014 "combine their powers" to "strike [them] with their fused magic," once they realize the bullies are really monsters in human form. And, quite disturbingly, three middle school students in Story #032 who are fed up with being "picked on" invent a robot that actually kills their bullies. A preferable solution to a bullying problem occurs in Story #059: When the leader of a group of bullies continually taunt Stacy and Lacy for having no friends other than each other, they decide to sit with a new student at lunch and end up becoming best friends with her, too. Toolup Blue, in Story #047, also makes a new friend when she tells the teacher about a bullying incident and subsequently befriends the girl who was being harassed.

"Frenemies." In one story (#126), there is an incidence of bullying that does not seem to be recognized as such by either the protagonists or the author. Zoey, a friend of twins Starr and

Skye, normally comes to school eager to be the center of attention, asking everyone in the class to guess which new fashion accessory she is wearing. One day, though, "Everybody was shocked when Zoey walked into class with no jewelry on, no accessories, no sparkles on her clothes, no fancy handbag, no anything." Zoey acts morose, refusing to speak to her friends and "looking sad" all day. Sensitive Skye and Starr spend the rest of the school day and all afternoon and evening worrying about their friend, wracking their brains to see if they might have offended her and wondering if she might be having problems at home. Finally, the next morning, Zoey looks happy again.

> "So. Did you have fun with my little experiment?" Zoey asked.
>
> "What experiment?!" Starr and Skye said together.
>
> "It was an experiment to see if you guys really care about my feelings. Turns out that you guys do care about my feelings." Zoey hugged her friends and went to her seat. (#126)

The story ends there, with the narrator claiming that that the rest of the school year was the "best ever," but it seems as though (if this were a real-life situation) Zoey's enjoyment of her friends' discomfort would likely to lead to more manipulative, destructive behavior.

Compassion Toward Bullies. In several stories, the underlying reason for the bully's bad behavior is revealed, engendering compassion toward the bully. For example, the aggressive figures in two stories (#044, #122) concede that their hostile actions stem from loneliness, and Crusher, the Monster Jam villain in Story #169, reveals to his rival, John Hyenna, that "'I'm only mad 'cause of my wife, she left me.'" Similarly, "Bad Guy" in Story #116 had turned evil after his only friend moved away and people teased him about his real name, Bob. When "Super Hero" takes time to listen to his story, he decides to join the forces of good. And, when Olivia and Kate from Story #118 confront the emperor about his cruel decree forcing everyone to leave

Paris, the emperor admits he is hurting because his parents abandoned him as a child. Wisely, the girls advise him, "'Well, the whole world does not need to suffer,'" and he immediately desists.

Bullies Having a Change of Heart. In Story #178, a little girl stands up for her friend, Katie, who is being made fun of by their classmate, John. When other kids start giving John a hard time, Katie and the protagonist step in to help him. Exactly how they help him is not explained, but John thanks them and apologizes for his earlier actions because now "he had felt what Katie was feeling." A bit of kindness also helps Tiana change her bullying behavior in story #200. As both the victim and perpetrator of bullying, Tiana is clearly dealing with a lot of powerful emotions, and when her new Boot Camp roommates throw a small party to welcome her, she realizes her anger stems from having a lack of real friends. In the closing of her story, Tiana (as narrator) writes, "I tried to keep from smiling at first, but suddenly I exploded with laughter and happiness. That day I realized all I really needed was friendship, and I had finally found it."

Finally, a particularly entertaining way in which bullies are converted to friends occurs in Story #100. A group of girls had been terrorizing Penelope, but when they hear an impassioned sermon delivered by "Father Joe" (Penelope's dad), they immediately apologize and change their ways: "He went on and said something very touching that the bullies heard, which was, 'Did God bully others? Heck NO!'"

Heroism

Ninety-four of the 237 stories contained events I coded as acts of heroism: saving a life, standing up to a bully, avenging the death of a loved one, recovering an important item, restoring a ruler to his or her rightful throne, or simply helping someone in some other way. In many cases, the protagonist is the rescuer; in others, the protagonist is the person being rescued. Eleven

stories feature superheroes, and eleven stories feature animals who are heroes. Sometimes, the hero is celebrated by the community (e.g., #014, #055, #098) and other times, the heroic act goes largely unnoticed (e.g., #037).

Rescuing Friends and Family. Two stories (#162, #168) feature protagonists who rescue their families from a fire, and a third story (#174) features a protagonist who escapes from a fire, then turns back to check on his or her family and realizes with great relief they are already safe. Three stories (#028, #044, and #081) depict children saving their parents from a "Sharknado," an evil uncle, and a witch, respectively. In two "fan fiction" stories, Albus saves Scorpius from a "Dementor's Kiss" (after *Harry Potter*, #110), and Archie and Jughead save Veronica after she is bitten by a shark (after the *Riverdale* television series, #153). In Story #112, a group of friends on a museum field trip save three classmates who have been turned into statues by finding and reciting a magic chant. In Story #076, a group on a trip to recover treasure in the Amazon jungle rescues their friend, Sam, when she is kidnapped by a "mad evil inventor." Story #055 describes a situation in which people keep disappearing into a mysterious treehouse. When Jack's friend Rick goes missing, he and another friend, Ally, spend a year trying to find him before finally succeeding.

Rescuing Others. In many stories, the person being rescued is not a friend or family member of the hero. For example, Allie and her family save some mermaids from a fisherwoman who is trying to have them stuffed and hung in a museum in Story #143. Scientists Steve and Kate, in Story #020, rescue "Mr. Crazy" from King Galgoth, a mean and hideous monster who has imprisoned him in the monster realm. In Story #041, Alex and Kane are on a treasure hunt when a man approaches them and tells them an evil king is holding some people hostage and he needs their help. Alex immediately answers, "'OK! I'm in if it involves saving!'" and the pair

proceeds to find the king, lock him up, and release the hostages. In the end, Alex says, "'We didn't find treasure, but at least we saved some people!'"

The police are responsible for rescuing people in four stories (#030, 031, #120, and #136). Less likely heroes—aliens—are found in Story #161; although Miles finds them intimidating when he first crash-lands into their planet, he soon realizes the aliens are friendly, and they help him find his way back to Earth. Another rather unlikely hero is featured in Story #098. James, an older man who survives a plane crash with six other people, becomes annoyed with the rest of the group and wanders off alone. Surprisingly, he returns a few days later with a boat and rescues his fellow survivors just in time before an erupting volcano overtakes the island.

Animals as Heroes. Animals act heroically in four stories with human protagonists: Horses in Stories #092 and #093 manage to bring their owners to safety during bad weather; dogs in Story #150 help their owner cross a crocodile-infested river; and a dog unknown to Ruby rescues her from drowning in a hotel pool in Story #132. Several other instances of animal heroism occur in stories where animals are personified, as when a rat saves his best friend, a dog, from some bears who have kidnapped him in Story #211, or when Prince Kipper, a dog, saves his beloved from an evil cat in Story #235. An especially sweet example is in Story #088, when a male cardinal valiantly leads a rogue hunter away from his home in order to protect his wife, nearly dying of cold in the process.

Recovering Important Items. In Story #123, Justin and his friends use classic interrogation tactics (i.e., "Good Cop/Bad Cop") to catch a thief who stole a ruby from a museum after hearing about the crime on television. In a similar story (#135), another group of friends travels to Spain to locate the world's biggest diamond, which has been stolen from a museum, and in Story #030, the police chase and capture a thief who has robbed a jewelry store.

When sucked into a video game and transformed into Mickey Mouse, the protagonist of Story #105 helps Daisy Duck defeat Pete, the evil cat, and retrieve a stolen gem. Magical jewels are recovered in Stories #039, #066, and #209. Finally, in Story #180, the "little guys" (a piglet and a duck) have the chance to be heroes because they are small enough to crawl under a fence to retrieve a lost ball for the "big guys" (a cow, a turkey, and a goat) who had previously rejected their invitations to play together.

Restoring Rulers to Their Rightful Thrones. A pharaoh (#061), a dragon queen (#144), a king (#185), and a mermaid queen (#229) are all saved by courageous protagonists in their respective stories and restored to their rightful thrones.

Superheroes. Eleven stories involve superheroes. In three instances (#021, #027, and #097), the protagonists transform into superheroes and save the day, and in two other instances, the protagonists—Professor Joe (#166) and Soar (a dragon, #142)—already possess superhero powers at the beginning of the story. In three stories, superheroes are called on to help in a time of crisis: The Great Phoenix (#023), Superduty Guy (#148), and Hero Chicklor (#163). Interestingly, in Story #116, "Super Hero" uses the power of compassion to stop "Bad Guy." He asks Bad Guy to explain why he is compelled to act evilly, and when his enemy explains he had been lonely and bullied prior to becoming evil, Super Hero says, "'I'm so sorry I never asked you about your past." His kind words inspire Bad Guy to give up his evil ways and join the forces of good.

Heroes in Battle. Nineteen stories include heroic actions that occur in the midst of some type of battle; 16 of those stories take place in fantastical settings and three describe realistic war battles (#007, #207, #208). Notably, 14 of these 19 stories were written by boys, three were written by girls, and two were written by authors whose gender information was not available.

Further, of the three stories written by girls, two of the authors only alluded to the battle but did not describe it. For example, in Story #097, protagonist and narrator Scarlet Katie Galaxy somewhat demurely states, “I’m safe at home now, but yesterday I fought Mr. Antonio—er—Bob, and he is uhhh . . . defeated” (ellipses used in original).

In contrast, most other stories about heroism during battle include descriptions of the fighting, which will be discussed in the following section.

Death and Violence

The subject of death came up with astounding frequency in the data. Twenty-two stories included the death of the antagonist, 11 stories included the death of the protagonist, six stories included the deaths of other major characters, and 10 stories included the deaths of people who were not characters in the story. People and animals died from natural disasters, accidents, illness, and in battle. Eleven additional stories mentioned deaths that occurred prior to the start of the story; six stories included near-death experiences; seven stories included attempted murders; and six stories included ambiguity about whether a character lived or died. In all, a staggering 74 stories—31 percent of the data set—addressed death in some way. Five additional stories included acts of violence that did not result in death, and there were ten stories that included at least one violent act I coded as “especially gruesome.” In the following paragraphs, I describe some of the ways in which death and violence were present in the stories.

Death of Antagonists. In several of the 22 instances where an antagonist dies, it seems as though the story could have just as easily concluded with an arrest—like in Story #026, when “Mystery Girl” kills the wicked king—or even with a school punishment, like when the bullies in Story #032 are killed before their fairly-mild offenses are ever reported to a teacher. In situations where the antagonist is some type of monster (e.g., #016, #072, #197), it seems more reasonable

that the battles would end in death. In multiple stories (e.g., #032, #081, #082, #097, #129), it was striking that in the *denouement* (the "falling action" that occurs after the climax) the protagonists simply went on about their day after killing foes, showing no remorse or stress. For example, the lines immediately following the witch's demise in Story #081 read as follows:

> I untied my mom and hugged her. That night, she said she was sorry that she didn't believe me. I told her it was OK. We both laughed and ate dinner. I helped her wash the dishes. I got in my nightclothes and went to sleep. I was glad the day was over. (#081)

Sometimes, passive or euphemistic language was used to describe killing an enemy, like in Story #082, when the narrator states that the three sisters "made [the witch] die," which seems to imply less responsibility over their actions than if they had "killed" her. Like the protagonist in the previous story, this trio also went home and ate dinner immediately after the incident.

Death of Protagonists. It surprised me to find that so many of the protagonists (11) died at the end of their stories. Story #037, for example, was a confusing account of someone who is described as a "slave" who knows he will die, but for reasons not made clear to the reader. After a scene in which a dragon smashes his ship in two, killing him, the story ends with these words: "You will never be known. They will replace you and the others. At least you died bravely." Another tragic ending occurs in Story #172, when an evil princess uses a boy who is in love with her as sacrifice to an erupting volcano: "It was too late for anyone to save him. He never found love."

The protagonist's death seems like a strange add-on to Story #205, titled *Jack the Running Boy.* The whole story is about Jack's determination to defeat his friend and running rival in a race. After years of hard work, Jack finally crosses the finish line first. Without even a moment to savor his well-deserved victory, Jack trips and breaks "several bones" during his cool-down laps, and while at the hospital, the doctor tells him that not only will he never run

again, he also has a terminal illness that will end his life in just three months. The story ends with Jack's "friends and family" finding his body after he dies in his sleep. The last line of the story adds insult to injury: "Jack was no longer the 'Running Boy.'" In a similar manner, the protagonists of Story #042, twins Ava and Thomas, finally escape years of mistreatment at the hands of the evil couple who had kidnapped them. The "parents" die while chasing after the twins (in self-defense, the boy and girl kill the couple with the adults' own weapons), but instead of running to freedom and a new life . . . the twins fall off a cliff and die.

Especially Gruesome Violence. Several stories include descriptions of violence and gore I found extreme. During battle scenes, a head is cut off (#016), an arm is sliced off (#036), and bodies are sliced in half (#032). When Ava and Thomas kill their false parents in self-defense (#042), "they hit them directly in the heart so hard and fierce their bodies slowly fell to the ground. A loud boom of hate roared when their bodies fell. Blood was everywhere!" Moments later, when the twins fall to their death, "their bones fell everywhere. Blood seeped through their cracked bones for the bloodthirsty animals creaking through that mysterious forest." When a shark is killed in Story #215, "there is an explosion of blood in the water," and a similar—but much gorier—description of a death involving sharks occurs in Story #072. In my notes about Story #038, I wrote, "Jane tortures her victims in very graphic ways—lots of gory detail that I don't even want to copy and paste here."

Race/Ethnicity

Some of the communities in which the student writers lived have primarily white populations while some are more racially diverse (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018), and it was interesting to see that race was not a subject or quality mentioned in most of the stories. In fact, only one story directly addressed race (#234), and only two additional stories (#068, #111) made

the race of the characters apparent by mentioning skin color in the description. Three more stories (#044, #098, #204) discuss skin color in such a way that leaves the race of the character unclear (i.e., the protagonists have "caramel" or "tan" skin).

There were 12 stories (#053, #079, #081, #082, #098, #106, #107, #132, #134, #204, #228, #233) where a character's eye color was mentioned as blue or green, which suggested to me that the characters were white. In fact, brown eye color, which is more common for both white people and people of color (Kiprop, 2019; Moyer, 2019), was only mentioned twice across all the stories. So, it is noteworthy that almost every student who chose to describe eye color mentioned blue or green eyes, which are generally only common among white people, but are still *less* common than brown eyes. This seems to show a preference for lighter eyes among this population of children, a point explored further in the discussion chapter.

"Slave Girl." While first reading Story #102, I was perplexed when the protagonist and her friend, Samantha, encounter someone they refer to as a "slave girl."

> "Well, it's probably school time." There was a slave girl walking with books and a bag.
> We said, "hi."
> She said, "[You] must be new. I'm Brook." (#102).

I had to read this story several times before I pieced together what was going on. The first two girls are from "history," apparently coming from a time when their only awareness of black people was as slaves. During a thunderstorm, they are teleported to 2019 ("*2019*" is the title of the story), and when they meet Brook, they assume she is a "slave girl," presumably because she is black. The story goes on with no more mention of race, and no clarification about Brook's status as a non-slave. In fact, Brook takes the two girls to school with her and then home for the night, where they tell Brook and her mother the truth of where they came from; apparently the fact that they assumed Brook was a slave at first did not mean they were uncomfortable letting

her be their host. When the girls tell Brook and her mother they would like to stay with them permanently, they readily agree.

Mary O. Ward. In Story #234, the only story in which race is presented as a central issue, Mary O. Ward feels out of place because she has dark skin and blue eyes, a genetically unlikely combination. One day, she meets a boy with the same features who is distributing invitations to his birthday party outside the town's bakery. Intrigued, Mary invites herself to the party, where she meets "a lot of dark-skinned people with blue and green eyes." Because the story seems to take place in a small town, it feels somewhat implausible that Mary would not have encountered these extended family members before, but that's beside the point: Mary feels acceptance in a way she's never experienced before, and at the end of the story, she yells, "'I am proud to be different, I am proud to be here, and I am proud to be African American!'"

Religion

Religion is not a topic that comes up often in the stories, but there are a few instances worth mentioning. The only time characters attend a church service is in Story #100, when Penelope's father gives the stirring sermon that makes the bullies see the error of their ways. A priest appears briefly in Story #117, when he uses "holy water" to remove a "possessed" figure from the family home. Two other stories (#103 and #106) make Satanic references; in Story #103, a group of 25-year-olds decide to "summon some horror people" and terrible events ensue. The devil actually appears as a character in Story #045—he and God are in an epic battle in the sky, though the story is mainly an account of the thousands of casualties suffered on both sides.

The afterlife is mentioned in two stories: After falling into a sinkhole and being unable to pull herself out, Jane ends up in heaven (#026), and, after Gabriel's Mamaw passes away (#190),

she comes back as a ghost to tell him she is happy and they will be together again one day, presumably in heaven.

Prayer and meditation occur in four stories. In Story #051, the protagonist endures a terrible series of events (she gets a bad grade, she is hospitalized after being pushed out of a tree, and she learns her parents have been in a bad car accident). She prays for "something good to happen," and it does—she gets a new puppy. Interestingly, she does not seem to credit God with answering her prayers; instead, she states, "I think my sister and brother heard me, because the next day, something good happened." Another protagonist prays when trying to resuscitate his or her father, who has become unconscious during a house fire (#162): "I hugged him tight and said, 'I really need a miracle.'" Prayer is used in a more casual sense in Story #041, when one character is "praying" another character will agree to his request to go on a treasure hunt. Finally, in Story #141, the ninjas meditate together, causing them to teleport to "the underworld" where they fight Krane but don't kill him because "'that's not what ninjas do.'"

Sports

I was surprised to find that, relatively speaking, sports were not mentioned very often in the data set. Only five stories depict the protagonist playing an organized sport (football, #087 and #191; running, #205; basketball, #231, and dance/cheer, #217). Three stories mention watching football (#009, #127) and soccer (#076, #127), and four stories mention sports that characters play or have played but they do not actually play them in the story (#030, #064, #065, #074). In several stories, characters participate in casual physical activities such as pick-up basketball (#014), a jumping contest (#220), informal soccer (#237), dodgeball (#032), "Just Dance" (#069), riding bikes (#072, #234), and swimming (#213, #217, #236). Also mentioned are "Dragon Games," a series of events for dragons reminiscent of the *Hunger Games* trilogy

(#101); a wrestling match between farmers to determine the winner of the other's farm (#090); a jousting lesson during "Knight School" (#131); and an "Airsoft War," in which players tag each other with replica guns (#181).

Teenage Life

In some stories, the relative age of the protagonist was not deducible, but many of the authors either explicitly shared the protagonist's age or provided strong clues. Four stories included protagonists younger than the fourth-grade authors (#035, #137, #178, #195) and four stories included protagonists identified as being right around the same age (#047, #053, #079, #117). Seven stories placed the protagonists as slightly older than the authors, in middle school (#010, #016, #032, #044, #074, #087, #159), and sixteen stories featured protagonists of high school age (#013, #014, #056, #072, #093, #098, #100, #151, #153, #191, #207, #208, #210, #216, #229, #231). The protagonists of eight more stories (#015, #021, #073, #102, #111, #127, #154, #198) seemed like they must be in middle or high school because they did things like attend school dances, switch classes for different school subjects, or worry about acne.

Clearly, the fourth-grade writers as a group have a keen interest in exploring teenage life through fiction. In many of the stories, they did so in much the same way as the fifth- and sixth-grade students in Dobson's (2015b) study, which he described as exploring the "figured world" of "American High School Drama" (p. 45). I identified eight stories (#014, #073, #074, #100, #102, #151, #198, #210) that especially aligned with Dobson's representation because (a) they featured interactions involving teen romance, (b) they depicted struggles among teenage friends and/or enemies, or (c) they included dialogue intended to reflect teen attitudes and speech patterns. All eight stories were written by girls.

Teen Bullying. Overlapping with the previous section on this theme, the way bullying is manifested as the central problem in Stories #014, #100, #198, and #210 fits into the American High School Drama trope. Cayley, the protagonist of Story #198, is bullied because her appearance does not adhere to the typical standard of beauty for teenagers, and she is very smart, which is a stereotypical "nerd" trait:

> Cayley wasn't like the other kids. She wasn't only intelligent; she was brilliant! She knew the answer to every question. Unfortunately, she wasn't very pretty at all. She had brown hair that tangled easily, she had an updown walk, and [she] wore big, black glasses. She was plagued with acne that she couldn't get rid of. (#198)

In contrast, Emily, the protagonist of Story #210, has no problems in high school except that she is targeted by Rebecca, who "is kind of pretty and all the boys like her," for no real reason. Rebecca trips Emily so she falls in the lunchroom, spreads lies about her, and at one point, pushes her to try to start a fight. Similarly, the "gang of brats" in Story #100 torments Penelope, who is new to the neighborhood, first by making fun of her clothes, then by throwing a ball at her when she tries to walk away, breaking her nose and her glasses. The bullies in Story #014, Melisa and Ellie, call Veronica names and try to make her feel insecure about the obvious crush she has on a male classmate:

> "I saw you with Ein before class. He'll never like you, you're too lame. You're human, he's half werewolf," Ellie declared.
>
> "Y-you're wrong!" Victoria said, almost crying.
>
> "No, no I'm not. You're just a stupid human," Ellie chuckled, walking away.
>
> Victoria fell silent. Was Ellie right? (#014)

In light of the existence of multiple stories incorporating bullying and teen drama, it seems students share an expectation that bullies will be a source of vexation when they enter their teenage years.

Outsider's View. Two stories involve people arriving in a modern high school from a different time or place, and it is interesting to note the things each author includes to express what goes on in a typical American high school. In Story #102, two girls from "history" are teleported to 2019 during a thunderstorm, and they immediately meet a teenage girl and tag along with her to school. At the school office, they get "a map, scissors, glue, pencils, class schedules, and six *Nate* books" (likely belonging to the *Big Nate* series for elementary children by Lincoln Peirce), which suggests a possible misunderstanding by the author of what supplies are needed by high school students. In this story, there are a lot of details about shopping for clothes, partly in preparation for a school dance, and an incident of bullying: "I was in the hallway and four girls said hi, and I knew it was a mistake. I woke up in the nurse's office" (#102). The implication is that the girls beat her to the point of unconsciousness, even though no context is provided for their antipathy toward the protagonist.

Story #073 starts with Nichole being teleported to a magical world, then four of the unicorns and mermaids she meets there are teleported back to her world and transformed into humans. Like in Story #102, the first priority is taking the "friends from far, far away" to school. One of the creatures-turned-girls, Tiffany, gets in trouble for talking to a boy during class and has to serve detention. Then, they get ready and go to a school dance, where the visitors hope to find a clue about how they can get back to their own world.

Romance. Story #014 explores teen romance more than any other story, though there were two fantastical stories (one with demigods as characters, #016, and one with dragons as characters, #144) that also touched on romantic feelings between girls and boys. In one scene, Victoria stops in her tracks when she sees her enemy, Mellisa, talking to the boy she has a crush

on, Ein, and her friends go with her to put a stop to it. Later, Victoria and Ein bond over a game of pick-up basketball, and at the end of the story, they actually exchange a modest kiss:

> "Ein, thank you for being there when no one cared," Victoria thanked.
>
> "You're welcome, thanks for accepting me and trusting me," Ein responded.
>
> "No problem!" Victoria replied, hugging.
>
> "Victoria, will you be the alpha female?" Ein asked.
>
> "Heck yeah!" Victoria replied.
>
> "OMG!!!" Tamara screamed, fainting.
>
> As Ein kisses Victoria on the cheek, Victoria blushes a lot. (#014)

Technology

Throughout the data, story characters frequently use cell phones and play video games, sometimes in ways that seem in juxtaposition to the rural or fantastical settings in which they exist. For example, Katie, the protagonist of Story #092, is taking care of her horses in the barn when she checks the weather app on her phone and notices there is a blizzard outside. In three stories, the protagonists settle in with video games after playing outside with a dog (#196), hunting deer (#077), and fishing (#218); and, after his Mamaw dies, the protagonist in Story #190 is too sad to play video games, suggesting they are a big part of his regular life. Several other stories (#099, #105, #108, #111, #192) involve characters getting sucked into a video game while playing. Texting among friends takes place in Stories #018, #076, #103, and #179, and cell phone calls are made or received in Stories #051, #077, #098, #151, and #200. In one comical exchange in the fantastical world of Unicorpia, the unicorn mom, Majesta, accuses her fairy "frenemy," Namil, of not seeing what happened between their children at the park because, "You were over there on the phone looking at FACEBOOK!"

Literature References

Though it would be impossible to recognize every time a student's writing was influenced by something he or she had read, there were many times when the influence of other fiction was evident in the stories. Students referenced or modeled their stories after fiction studied as part of the Promoting PLACE Fiction unit as well as classic and modern literature.

Literature from Curriculum. Five stories (#107, #109, #132, #139, #202) included elements similar to those in *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll (1865; Lesson 1). Much like Alice falls through the rabbit hole, Ruby (#132) falls for three hours into "some type of mystical land," and Kloe, in Story #107, is guided by a bunny when she discovers herself to be in a magical world, much like Alice is guided by the White Rabbit in her tale. In Stories #109 and #132, characters come across strange potions instructing them to drink them. When Alice drinks the potion she finds in her story, she becomes tiny; In Story #109, the three siblings who drink the potion are teleported home, and the boy who drinks the potion in Story #139 starts talking backwards. Story #202 is about a girl who, like Alice, is reading a book by a pond when she pets a "weird bug" (reminiscent of the hookah-smoking caterpillar from the Disney version of *Alice in Wonderland;* Geronimi, 1951), and is immediately transformed into a cat. Much like Alice, Izzy is relieved to wake up from a nap and find the experience had all been a dream.

Tiana (#200), with her messy hair, difficulty fitting in, and tendency to act out, reminds me of Meg Murry, the protagonist from *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeline L'Engle (1962; Lesson 9). Story #060, about three brothers and a sister discovering that their long-lost father is the king of an alien planet, also seemed to have been influenced by *A Wrinkle in Time,* in which Meg and her three brothers find themselves in a similar situation. Story #112, in which a group of friends helps save their classmates who had been turned into statues and trapped in the basement of a

museum, shares similarities with *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* by E. L. Konigsburg (1967; Lesson 5), which is set primarily within New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art. Additionally, the story of Bob, a clever, kind boy whose family moves frequently and who is confronted by bullies at his new school (#240), is reminiscent of *Hoot* by Carl Hiaasen (2002; Lesson 6) in which a very similar character, Roy Eberhardt, faces the same challenges.

Three "survival" stories (#058, #114, #170) were very similar to Jean Craighead George's *My Side of the Mountain* (1959; Lesson 6), a novel which includes detailed descriptions of a boy's wilderness adventures. Two fairy tale stories (#063, #185) share plot points with the Brothers' Grimm fairy tale, *The Queen Bee* (1886), studied in Lesson 11. In all three stories, the protagonist encounters three or four "roadblocks" (e.g., wolves, snakes, bees) on a journey through the forest, and the virtue of one character in each story is revealed by the kind way in which he or she treats the animals.

Classic Literature from Outside the Curriculum. Four stories were especially reminiscent of fairy tales. Story #125 is actually a retelling of *Cinderella*, except that the fairy godmother role is fulfilled by a gray, shaggy dog. Stories #107 and #186 share similarities with *Beauty and the Beast* and *Snow White*, respectively, and Story #187 is a twist on *The Three Little Pigs.* In Story #132, just like Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz* (Baum, 1900), Ruby finds herself in a magical world and must travel to see a wise old character, the Wizoala (a cross between a wizard and a koala), in order to get home. Story #113 is a fan-fiction mash-up of *The Wizard of Oz* and *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 1997-2007), with Dorothy and Voldemort as protagonist and antagonist. Three stories (#060, #114, #204) reminded me of C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-56) in various ways, and the way the formerly-rich princesses in Story #183 have to work

in the fields among "common" people triggered memories of three separate Bible stories about Ruth, Joseph, and the prodigal son.

Modern Literature from Outside the Curriculum. As one might expect, this group of fourth-grade writers seemed very familiar with the *Harry Potter* series by J. K. Rowling (1997-2007). Three stories (#108, #110, #113) were Harry Potter fan fiction (the characters in the stories were the actual characters in the series). Other stories featured teleportation through fireplaces (#109), dementor-like figures with "souls darker than pitch black night" (#061), and giant spider-monsters (#072, #171), all elements appearing in *Harry Potter.* Several young writers, all girls, wrote stories with dragons as characters, reflecting the *Wings of Fire* children's book series (Sutherland, 2012-), and like the popular *Percy Jackson* series (Riordan, 2005-2011), two stories (#015, #016) revolved around the world of Greek gods and demigods.

Non-Literary Popular Culture References. Though it is outside the scope of this dissertation to explore in great detail the ways in which popular culture influenced the students' writing (Dyson, 1997, 2003), there were multiple instances in which I could not help but notice similarities between the stories and popular culture. First, two stories (#024, #111) take place within the Minecraft video game (Mojang Synergies, 2009), and several more mention "Herobrine," a Minecraft villain (#083), and lava tubes (#141, #149, #152, #157), which are featured in Minecraft. Five stories (#077, #121, #139, #192, #226) mention Fortnite, another popular video game (Epic Games, 2017). Superheroes Batman and Superman appear in Stories #021 and #124, and The Great Phoenix character from Story #023 seems inspired by Batman (James Bond is also a character in that story). Archie, Veronica, Betty, and Jughead, from the classic Archie comics (Bloom, 1942) as well as the current television show, *Riverdale,* star in Story #153. The dynamic between older and younger sisters Tanasia and Emma in Story #183 is

very similar to that of Elsa and Anna in Disney's *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013); and, in both, the action begins when the princesses' parents are accidentally killed. Finally, the dilemma faced by Sifix (#087), who is having trouble reconciling his love of both science and football, is quite similar to that of Troy Bolton from the *High School Musical* movies (Ortega, 2006), who is caught between theatre and basketball; in both stories, pressure is exacerbated because each boy's father is the coach of the sports team on which he plays.

Common Story Elements

My first research sub-question was, *What elements of narrative fiction writing can fourth graders use successfully?* In this section, I will describe the way students used story conventions, advanced vocabulary, language play, dialogue, characterization, rich descriptions, story language, and literary themes/motifs in their narrative fiction stories.

Story Conventions

Openings and Closings. Across the data set, there were 35 stories which began with the classic, "Once upon a time." Coincidentally, there were an equal number of stories (35) which began with, "One day," and an additional 48 stories began with a variation such as "Once" (#035, #053, #100, #141), "One time" (#155, #156, #157, #222), "One morning (#030)," "One summer day" (#193), "Once there was" (e.g., #005, #023, #046, #175), "Once I was" (#169), or "There was once" (e.g., #013, #044, #134, #160, #210). Twenty-two more stories began with "It was a" or "There was a" (e.g., #012, #039, #051, #089, #197). A few stories had more creative openings, like this one, from Story #062: "I woke up on the floor of an alleyway in France. My name was Jacque, I had no last name and no money, but I made a plan to get to America." Story #140 also opened dramatically with, "Footsteps echoed down the hallway. [The] Queen walked down the halls to see what was in her palace. It was as dark as night." And, before beginning his

tale of battle with monsters and demigods, the narrator of Story #016 opens by saying, “If you think you have an extraordinary life, try being me for once,” setting the stage for an adventure.

As might be expected, many of the same stories that begin with “once upon a time” end with “they lived happily ever after” (#048, #063, #107, #119, #125, #142, #228, #229); a total of 16 stories (e.g., #035, #063, #112, #125) end with those exact words, and quite a few others (e.g., #199) end with a similar “happy” sentiment. The ending of Story #194 caught my attention because after suffering through the death of both their beloved dog and their mother, things work out in the end for sisters Emma and Olive: “But they moved on. They got married in big houses with their husbands and lived happily ever after.” Apparently, the girl who wrote this story considered having husbands and big houses to be the keys to happiness for adults—not a particularly feminist stance. A few stories, (e.g., #042, #172, #205) end very tragically, and 17 stories (e.g., #045, #054, #090, #163) end with the classic cliffhanger, *“To Be Continued. . ..”*

Addressing the Reader. Another story convention used by student writers was the direct address to the reader. Sometimes skillfully—and other times in ways that seemed less purposeful—narrators addressed comments to the reader directly, often by introducing themselves and providing an important fact (e.g., “Hi, my name is Toolup Blue. I just started fourth grade,” #047; “Hello, my name is Frankie. I’m moving to Cartersville, Texas. It is a really gloomy place,” #094; “Hi, my name is Libro and I love my dad,” #095). The most comical self-introduction is from Story #097:

> Hi! My name is Scarlet Katie Galaxy. My friends call me Katie. I’m 11 and in fifth grade. Everyone always tells me I’m a really, super nice, great person. I say, “Thanks!” but that they’re even nicer since they said that. Then I give them a compliment in response to them telling me this just because it’s the right thing to do. Then they come back and tell me I’m sweet, so I once again say, “Thanks! That’s so nice of you! You’re sweet, too!” Although, that’s not important now. (#097)

Story #131 is the one the involves the reader most directly. It is a "day in the life" account of Prince George's experiences in Knight School, and it sounds a bit like he is narrating events through the lens of a cell phone camera, like a You-Tube "influencer" might. In Story #107, the narrator begins by telling us she's about to reveal how she discovered she is a fictional character and asking us to consider whether we "might just be a fictional character" as well, a story device reminiscent of the philosophical novel *Sophie's World* (Gaarder, 1994). The narrator of Story #056 continually anticipates that the reader will find holes in his story, and he asks us for the benefit of the doubt: "Just let me tell you the rest of the story. Then you will believe them, just like me." And, confidently, the narrator of Story #130 begins by letting the reader know, "I will tell you the best story you ever heard."

Chapters. Twenty-eight writers (e.g., #051, #071, #129, #157) divided their stories into chapters, some including chapter titles and some just using numbers. Ten additional writers (e.g., #014, #035, #066, #067) added section breaks between scenes without calling the distinct sections "chapters."

Sudden Transitions. Because it happened so often, I kept track of the number of stories in which the author transitioned from one event to another by using the words "suddenly" or "all of a sudden." There were 61 stories (e.g., #028, #046, #113, # 214) in which these phrases occurred.

Story Devices

Teleportation. The student writers used certain literary devices with great frequency. Teleportation, for one, where story characters are suddenly and magically transported to a different place and time, occurred in 26 stories. Characters teleport into magical worlds, often inhabited by unicorns and fairies (#039, #066, #073, #107, #114, #130, #132, #156); video

games (#054, #099, #105, #108, #111, #192); the underworld or other places inhabited by ghosts and spirits (#141, #157, #204); and through time (#102, #144). Portals bring characters away from home and, usually, bring them home again.

Foreshadowing/Foreboding. Students made use of foreshadowing or foreboding in at least 14 stories, sometimes subtly and sometimes overtly. Very strong hints are dropped at the beginning of Story #011, for example, when the protagonist boards the *Titanic* despite repeatedly having a "strange feeling like we were aboard the world's greatest sea disaster." In a story about visiting a haunted school, four friends find several mannequins lying around, then visit the school's graveyard to see that teenagers with their same names were buried there a hundred years ago. In the last lines of the story, Billy starts to alert his friends to a strange message on the blackboard, "but when he turned around, the kids' bodies had been turned into mannequin bodies," a creepy event that had been foreshadowed by the earlier discoveries (#106). Another example comes in Story #098, when Marine asks her twin Marie to race up the "hill" on the island on which they are stranded. Marie points out that the hill is actually "a mountain, or an inactive volcano," foreshadowing its later eruption. One narrator foreshadows a hopeful outcome by stating, "I woke up that Sunday morning not realizing what a special day it would be for me" (#203). Several narrators begin their stories with foreboding lines: "It was a peaceful day . . . at least that's what the citizens think" (#022); "It was an ordinary day—at least, I thought it was" (#051); "They all live a normal life. Well, at first they did . . ." (#100).

Surprise Twists. Surprise twists occur in many stories, like when one of Penelope's bullies turns out to be her long-lost twin (#100), or when the animal shelter's kind caretaker decides to adopt Brownie's brother, Biscuit, alleviating the stress Brownie feels at having been

chosen by a family and having to leave Biscuit behind (#203). Oddly, Mary O. Ward is not phased in the least when her mother says:

> "I have a gift for you . . . your father."
>
> Mary said, "I thought Jeremy L. Mitchell was my father?"
>
> Her [brand-new!] dad said, "No. I'm right here. . .."
>
> Mary grabbed her father George O. Ward's hand and took him to Tim's birthday party. (#234)

In an especially unexpected (and unexplained) surprise (#036), a girl known as "Mystery" heroically defeats the evil king, then marries his son, the kind prince. In a shocking twist in the last line of the story, she reveals to her new husband, "'I'm not a human.'"

It Was All Just a Dream. Sixteen stories end with the classic literary device used in both *Alice in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1865) and *The Wizard of Oz* (Baum, 1900), where the protagonist wakes up to discover his or her experiences had all been a dream, with four of the 16 ending ambiguously (e.g., "It was just a dream . . . or was it?" #099). In certain stories (e.g., #111, #171, #202, #205), it seems logical that a human character's fantastical experiences would have been just a dream, but in others, it feels like the author could have left that out without affecting the story.

Morality. There were eight stories in the data set that successfully conveyed a moral message, and one (#033) in which a moral imperative is simply tacked onto the end of a rather confusing story: "*Moral:* Remember to always be kind." In Story #180, the farm animals learn not to discriminate on the basis of size when the "little guys" come to the rescue of the larger animals: "From that day on, all the animals agreed to be friends with everyone, no matter how big or small they were. Even if you're little, you can still accomplish big things" (#088). Similarly, in Story #173, the author takes a firm stance against gender discrimination by showing

a “girl astronaut” succeed at the highest levels in her field despite having been told that “girls can’t go in space.” Story #188 shares the message that “telling the truth is always best,” and Story #186 illustrates that inner beauty is more important than outer appearances. The princess in Story #182 learns to listen to her father instead of doing things in her own reckless way, and in Story #198, Cayley learns that “real friendship can’t be bought.” In Bootsy’s epic adventure (#104), the author demonstrates that it is wrong to abandon friends in their time of need, despite the risks involved in helping them. Finally, in perhaps the most sophisticated delivery of two separate morals—that you don’t need riches to be happy and that virtue is its own reward—the former princess in Story #183 shares these thoughts with her younger sister, who had started pondering “what might have been” if they had found the magic necklace, that, according to prophecy, would make its possessor into “the wisest and fairest queen in the land”:

> “Well, you know what I think,” answered her [older] sister, “that I don’t need anything else to be happy. We spent months traveling from castle to castle to live the life of queens, but I have never been so happy as I am now, even though we don’t have much. If I had to choose a necklace,” she continued, joyfully dancing about by the door, “it would be one just our family had left us,” she ended, laughing. And then with a solemn gesture, [she placed] the key in the safe that was right in front of them the whole time. The safe was their memories and being thankful for what they had, which were the memories they had and the ones they continued to make as sisters. Just then, the room filled with lights and music, and from that old key arose a wonderful palace filled with life and colour. The place became totally transformed; there were fountains, gardens, and animals. The village people marveled at all of this.
>
> The only thing which remained as it had been was the cabin door, reminding everyone of how Tanasia the Wonderful—which was what they called their wise queen—had found that in a simple, humble life lay the doorway to happiness, not only for herself, but for all the inhabitants of the land. (#183)

Advanced Vocabulary

Some of the fourth-grade authors used vocabulary that was quite impressive—and they always used the advanced words correctly. Table 6 shows a sampling of the difficult words found in the data. I separated the words by story, rather than presenting them in one long list, to

illustrate how there were certain authors who used many sophisticated words within a single story (e.g., #038, #098, #183, #185). Incidentally, a comparison of this table with Table 2 shows that 9 of the 10 stories rated "best of the best" are represented on this chart, suggesting that incorporating advanced vocabulary improves story quality among these young writers.

Table 6

Examples of Advanced Vocabulary Use

001	obstacles, replenishes
006	exclaimed, whimpered
013	adrenaline, intoxicated, satchel
014	epic, exhaustedly, fused/fusing, shock wave
015	banshees, catapult, ceremonial, chaos, javelins, respawning, sprouted, strategy, summoning
038	amiss, bloodshot, cackled, coarse, concoct, counterbalance, creased, dagger, dodging, foyer, fulfilled, hurled, mallet, maneuverer, matted, pleated, rumpled, tattered, umpteenth, unleashes, vial
050	clearance, cryptogram code breaking, decoder, humiliation, opportunity
062	alleyway, harbor, lurched, propeller
066	adorned, burgundy, darted, reassured, streaked, ventured
072	brigaded, escort
083	capsules, meteor, morphed
088	frigid, lure, rogue
098	adventuring, alerted, almighty, civilized, dazed and confused, decomposed, fiery, foul, frantic, fumed, gasps, inactive, in sync, mangled, rubble, snarkily, stench, sulfur, triumph/triumphantly, trudges, waddled, wearily, wrath
100	aggravated/aggravating, outrageously
104	bloodthirsty, continuously, fending off, gazing, grumbled, mysterious, raging, saliva, shriek, soothed, stubborn, trance, vicious, victorious, whimpered
106	Quavered
134	aggressive, cruel, sinister, stunning
144	firescales, gleam, pendant, rummaged, sapphire, scroll, swished
156	berserk, unconscious
180	accomplish, cautiously, daybreak, stern
182	consequences, devastated, discipline, electrocuted, hysterically
183	alongside, amused, ancient, arose, devoted, gesture, glimmer, gradually, humble, magnificent, marveled, prophecy, reminisced, solemn, tidying, tragedy
184	cautiously, commonly, mute, observant, radiating, relishing, reluctantly, untended

185	dedicated, dense, devoted, devoured, erupted, feat, inhabitants, materialized, quarreled, quiver, salve, slithered, thistle, vicious, wither
186	awoke, breathless, elegant, fashionable, hideous
197	colossal, elation, feast, gigantic, tentacles, vigorously
198	beaker, blurting, brilliant, contentment, plagued, serum, shattered, radiant, vital
200	fall in, fright, horrendous, moped, petulant, slumped, slung, solitary confinement, vast
201	familiar, latched, weathered
203	anxiously, caretaker, fret, kibble, scarfed, whimper
204	breathtaking, downfalls, murky, peculiar, scrumptious
205	exasperated, reluctantly, tension

Language Play

Burrell and Beard (2018) described some of the many ways in which the student writers they studied (ages 9-11) engaged in "language play," which Crystal (1996) defined as occurring "when people manipulate forms and functions of language as a source of fun for themselves and/or for the people they are with" (p. 328). Following Burrell and Beard (2018), I noted instances of language play in several categories—*alliteration, simile, hyperbole, graphemic symbolism,* and *amusing names*—though some of the examples fit into more than one category (e.g., similes which are also alliterative).

Alliteration. Earlier, I mentioned the authors' propensity to use alliterative and rhyming names for twins. Other examples of alliteration were found in Story #001, when "a bone-chilling breeze blew through the bushes"; Story #002, when the protagonist is "gazing in the green, luscious grass and the crystal clear water"; Story #197, when the narrator describes "a sunny day on the shiny, silvery sea," and the sea creature's "slippery, slimy tentacles"; Story #037, when "a general leads you to the ship like a sheep to the slaughter"; and Story #199, which mentions diamonds "as shiny as the stars in the sky" and emeralds "as green as grass."

Simile. The authors used simile quite frequently in their stories. One creative example is when the author of Story #098 concludes by saying that "the years have passed, and the story of

the island and the people still floats around like a piece of driftwood in a sea of storytelling." The face of an angry teacher in Story #200 is "as red as blood," and the boulders in Story #015 were "as big as cabins." Characters' frightened reactions are described in Story #015 ("the whole camp screamed like banshees"); Story #023 (Sir Walter Snake "ran away screaming like a little baby"); and Story #197 (the townspeople were "scared out of their minds like little babies"). In Story #075, the characters' plan of escape "worked as successful as an apple pie with whipped cream and a cherry on top," and in Story #204, Maria's visit to the "wonderfully careless cottage" where Bob the ghost lived "was like a vacation from her tidy brother Jack."

Hyperbole. Hyperbole was a popular form of descriptive language across the stories. In Story #198, Cayley's "jaw dropped open" when she saw her transformed appearance in the mirror. The Ol' Cracken, who was certainly an imposing monster, was described in Story #197 as seeming to be "300 feet wide and about 50 miles long," obviously an exaggeration. People's reactions to events were hyperbolic in several instances, like in Story #201, when the protagonist's wife "suddenly turned white"; when "Bob's cheeks turned rosie red" and his loveliness "blinded" Maria in Story #204; or when Brownie's ears "grew wide with excitement" upon seeing a potential new family at the animal shelter in Story #203. In Story #111, the narrator provides a more honest qualifier after her hyperbolic statement, "It took me forever to find my laptop. (It only took two minutes.)."

Graphemic Symbolism. Burrell and Beard (2018) defined graphemic symbolism as instances where authors write in all capital letters for emphasis, use extra exclamation points or question marks at the end of sentences, or add ellipses for dramatic effect. I found graphemic symbolism throughout the stories, primarily when characters were angry or shocked. In Story #014, for example, Tamara squeals, "OOOOOO!!!" when her sister, Victoria, whispers with her

crush, Ein, and then, “OMG!!!” when Ein later asks Victoria to be his girlfriend. In Story #126, Starr demands to know if her sister was thinking about their friend Zoey’s strange behavior at school, and Skye stutters, “‘N-no!’” Kloe, in Story #107, also stutters when the magical bunny she’s following asks if she’s ever experienced “anything weird” that could indicate magic powers: “W-well I guess s-something has happened before. . . . but I’m sure it was um, um, just the wind.” When Webby, the evil computer in Story #149, thinks he has tricked his nemesis, Cat, he laughs, “‘Haha, you really BELIEVED me?’” And, when “mean girl” Victoria finds out her former enemy, Penelope, and former friend, Daisy, are long-lost twin sisters (#100), she “was all like, ‘Uh . . . good! JK! I am so HAPPY for you guys!’” Apparently not fooled by her attempt to sound nice, the new sisters reply, “‘Thanks that is “so nice” of you to say that.’”

Onomatopoeia. Students used onomatopoeia, or words such as *honk, zap, vroom* whose sounds imitate the noises they are intended to describe, throughout their stories. A few examples are *thump* (#005, #038, #067, #195), *crack* (#013, #042, #057), *boom* (#007, #012, #058, #098, #207, #221) and *ding/bing* (#106, #133, #163); many of these were written in all capital letters, and were thus also examples of graphemic symbolism.

Amusing Names. The students with whom Dobson (2015a, b) and Millard (2005) worked enjoyed “playing around” with characters’ names, and the student authors whose work I studied did as well. Across 237 stories, there are far too many instances of creative naming to report, but the following is a list of just some of the entertaining names used:

- #019, Cluster McDonald Burger, a villain
- #020, Mr. Crazy, a monster
- #022, General Panic, Captain Obvious, General Pain, Captain Courageous
- #040, Eyeball Monster and Mexican Weird Taco Guy
- #047, Toolup Blue
- #075, Sunkitty, Moonpuppy, Octavia, and Vinyl Scratch
- #087, Sifix (for a boy who loves science)

- #098, Mrs. Eloise Clocksworth, a rich, elegant lady
- #116, “Super Hero” and his nemesis, “Bad Guy”
- #123, Mr. Evil
- #127, Ibra, “the coolest name [the narrator has] ever heard”
- #131, Mrs. Meow, Mr. Kitty, and Mr. Knight Cat, teachers at Knight School
- #148, President Retrac (Carter spelled backwards), Superduty Guy
- #149, Webby, an evil personified computer
- #152, Snowball, Cupcake, Buttercup, Buccaneer, Butterscotch, Bettei, and Bob
- #166, Mr. Squizyack
- #180, Baycon, a piglet
- #189, Pizza, a cat who steals a family’s pizza
- #200, Mrs. Scarey, a mean teacher
- #229, Sea, a high school girl who discovers she is part mermaid
- #232, Jack Pineapple, rival of Chester Cheese (both are mice).

Dialogue

Student authors used dialogue to advance their stories and to provide details about their characters’ personalities. For example, in Story #010, the protagonist and her sister, Nelly, are considering entering a haunted school when a “creep guy” warns them to stay away:

> “I wouldn’t go in there if I were you.”
>
> Nelly and I jumped up and turned around. To our surprise we saw a creep guy. Here’s a definition: Ripped shirt, stained jeans, messy hair, and no shoes.
>
> “Why shouldn’t we?” Nelly said, crossing her arms.
>
> “Because, it’s haunted. I’ve watched people go in, and they nev—”
>
> “Never come out. Blah, blah, blah, yeah I see it in movies, mister.” Nelly did that in a really rude way.
>
> We ran in, but he didn’t chase after us. He just shook his head back and forth, his brown hair shaking with it. As soon as we got in, the doors slammed shut. “Let’s go explore!” Nelly said excitedly.
>
> “You go right ahead. I don’t think this is what I wanted today.” (#010)

This exchange of words among the characters shows that Nelly is the more daring sister, who is impolite to strangers and does not want to listen to things that contradict her desires, while the protagonist is much more cautious.

In Story #016, the author could have conveyed the following information more directly through narration, but he chose instead to provide the details of the quest on which the characters are about to embark through dialogue. These few lines also give the reader definitions for two words they may not know, *satyr* and *quest:*

> I asked [the camp director], "What's up with the goat legs, sir?"
>
> "I'm a satyr, a descendant of Pan, god of the wild."
>
> "Is it like being a goat?" I asked.
>
> "Sure, something like that, son," he replied.
>
> "OK, that's somewhat cool," I said.
>
> "But anyway," he said, "I've got a quest for you four."
>
> "What's a quest?" I asked.
>
> "Well, it is like a mission but for demigods," he said. "You have to travel to the Amazon rain forest, find Pandora's box, free your friend Blake, defeat a Titan, then go to Olympus, OK?" (#016)

Finally, a very realistic exchange of dialogue from Story #126, when Skye emerges from the basement after having been missing for a couple of hours following an argument, illustrates the author's awareness of how the closest of sisters, even twins, can hurt each other:

> "You were in the basement this whole time?!" Starr said, looking surprised.
>
> "Yeah. Why do you care?" Skye looked as if she had been crying. Skye almost never cries! She only cries if she's sick, injured, or if she's at a funeral.
>
> "Were you crying? You never cry." Starr said.
>
> "Well, I cried today." She walked to her room and took a shower and went to bed. (#126)

Internal Dialogue. There were many instances where the author communicated a character's thoughts or feelings through internal dialogue. For example, when John agrees to explore a haunted school with his friends, then immediately regrets it, the reader knows what he is thinking because of the author's use of internal dialogue:

> "I don't think I want to explore it," said John. He hated scary things, but he quickly changed his mind so that Billy didn't think he was scared, so he said, "I mean, I want to spend the night in it!" *Oh no, what did I do?* he thought. *That's not what I meant to say!* (#106)

In Story #126, Starr has been worried all day about what could be bothering her friend Zoey, who was not acting like herself at school. Later that evening, after she and her twin sister, Skye, have a fight and Skye goes missing, Starr glances at a list she had made earlier "of people Zoey might be mad at." She ignores the list: *"I don't have time to think about Zoey right now,* Starr thought to herself. *I've got bigger problems."* In a similar story about twins, Audrey faces a moral conflict when she overwaters her sister's sunflower—should she admit her mistake, or just walk away and hope no one notices?

> Nobody was in the kitchen when it happened. *I can just leave it,* Audrey thought. *I'll just tell her that I watered it and she won't go into the kitchen.* Audrey put Aubrey's flower back on the windowsill and walked silently back to the living room. (#128)

The internal dialogue used by all three authors allow us to understand the characters' motivations and struggles.

Sarcasm. Students seemed to enjoy incorporating sarcasm into both internal and external dialogue. For example, when Bootsy (an almost-grown kitten) returns to the barn where, earlier, she had been introduced to her new friends Loso and Shimmer (#104), she greets them excitedly, but then realizes they are in the middle of an argument. Suddenly, Shredder, the wise cat from whom Bootsy and her mother were seeking advice, runs through the barn, chased by a ferocious dog and yelling for help:

> I ran after him, followed by Loso. I ran and ran until I reached this weird place. It was spooky. I looked around for Loso. I found him behind a tree, huddled up, gazing into his very soul. "Well, that got dark in a hurry," I muttered. (#104)

In another exchange between Bootsy and her mother, she shows a bit of "attitude." Bootsy's mom says she does not think the dreams Bootsy has been having can be considered "visions" because she's "just a kitten":

> "Only adult cats can have visions. Maybe we will take you to Shredder," Mom said continuously, which never seemed to end but it did.
>
> "OK, first I am almost an adult. I'm only one month away from my birthday. Second, who is Shredder? He sounds vicious. And scary. And weird. Is he a wild cat?" I had a lot of other questions in my mind but didn't say them out loud.
>
> "OK, Miss Adult. Shredder is not vicious, scary, or weird. And yes he was a wild cat. He is . . . wise," said Mom.
>
> I was like, "Cool—*not.* Really mom, all you could think of was wise? I am impressed." But [I had more sense than] to say [this] aloud. (#104)

In Story #083, friends Max and Coner keep hearing that more and more people have disappeared into a hole they'd discovered earlier, caused by a meteor they saw fall from the sky. Finally, Max has heard enough and decides to take action.

> "Let's go," Max said.
>
> "Go where?" Coner said.
>
> "Where do you think? We're going to the giant hole, genius," Max said. (#083)

After surviving a plane crash, characters in Story #098 start introducing themselves to one another, but things are a little tense. Bexly, a teenage girl, is fed up and oozing with sarcasm:

> "What are [we] doing now, patty cake?!" Bexly fumed.
>
> "No, we are now going to share facts about each other!" Mrs. Clocksworth said happily.
>
> "I'm out," James said.
>
> "Well, then, let's start! I'll go first! I've been married for 18 years!"
>
> Everybody frowned. "Your 'interesting' fact is how long you've been married?!" Bexly asked snarkily. (#098)

Characterization

Most of the student writers were able to convey information about characters' personalities and purpose in the story. One great example of characterization is found in Story #081, in a scene that comes after the protagonist and her friends meet an old woman in the park whom they believe to be a witch:

> Five minutes later, I heard a knock at the door. I heard the door open and lightning was booming. I got off my bed and looked downstairs and I couldn't believe my eyes. It was the old lady and she was fake crying, saying, "I'm lost and I need help."
>
> My mom let her in. When they walked past, she saw me and gave me a wicked smile. I know I had to stop her once and for all, or this curse will never stop. I got on my phone and called Stacy and Jennifer and told them my plan and they agreed. I had to go downstairs to go to the basement where all my stuff was at, so I went downstairs quietly.
>
> When I looked, I saw my mom giving her a blanket and tea. I got jealous because she was caring for her and not me. (#081)

The description of the woman's "fake crying," which fools the protagonist's mother, and subsequent "wicked smile" confirms to the protagonist her belief that the woman is evil. At the same time, it shows the protagonist to be an action-oriented person who has some underlying feelings of jealousy about her mother that might be fueling her resolve to "stop her once and for all."

In Story #128, Audrey and Aubrey show themselves to be very thoughtful children—caretakers just like their mother. When both of their classes plant sunflowers as Mother's Day gifts, Aubrey and her friend go to check on their plants, and when they notice some of their classmates' soil is looking dry, they go ahead and water it for them. Once the children take the plants home, it is the other twin, Audrey, who notices her sister's plant needs watering and tries to take care of it for her.

Rich Descriptions/Story Language

Rich descriptions and sophisticated uses of "story language" exist throughout the data set. With the following list, I highlight five of the most impressive examples.

- For years and years, you've had the same dream, over and over again. You, trapped in a temple, eons away from home. You, running from guards and mythical beasts. You, looking out for traps. There is one thing different from your other dreams, though. You, finding the Ruby of Narzia! (#039)

- As the wicked man clenched his shattered jaw and as blood drizzled down his lips, he said, "I should have killed your mother before you were born." With no mercy and no regret and filled with rage, she struck him down with his last breath. Ella had avenged her beloved mother. (#013)

- *A poem shared among townspeople warning of Jane's wickedness:*
  Jane will take you, Jane will
  Hide your pretty face or she'll kill
  Don't be happy, she feasts upon that
  Don't let her take you or you'll never come back!
  Like a shadow, she slinks in the night:
  You feel a cold hand squeezing you tight.
  You try to scream, but your breath is gone.
  Here comes Jane, who means a lot of harm!
  Watch out for Jane, parents warn their kids,
  But no matter how you warn, you won't live! (#038)

- Dawn walked through her cave at Mt. Emerald. Sunlight streamed through the holes in the ceiling. She rummaged through her storage chest. *Let's see,* Dawn thought as she put items in her bag. Fruit, cloak, and a scroll with info about where they were going. Every group went somewhere for historic research. She and her friends were going to the Altar of Darkness. Dawn shook out her wings and took a deep breath. Then she swished her curtain open and met her friends outside. (#144)

- Again, April and May cleaned the kitchen and took food to Brownie. After giving the puppy some fresh water, the girls decided to go to the park to play. April tucked Brownie in her jacket so their mother wouldn't see. Once at the park, Brownie romped in the grass, nipped at their heels, and finally napped in the warm sunshine. "Taking care of a puppy is harder than it looks," said May. (#188)

Themes/Motifs

Several common themes and motifs were found throughout the stories. Eight stories involve the protagonist moving to a new place (#074, #094, #100, #119, #129, #155, #156, #240), and seven more stories involve a friend moving away (#080, #116, #127, #133, #143, #151, #223). Seven stories mention legends (#005, #027, #110, #112, #132, #232, #237), two stories mention prophecies (#038, #183), and two stories involve a character having visions (#104, #185). Eighteen stories describe a character going through a transformation (e.g., Destiny's friends turning into evil dolls, #198; Phantom the evil dragon turning into a strawberry, #144; Milo the unicorn turning into a pink sprinkled donut, #048). Four stories involve seeking advice from a wise old character (#048, #104, #132, #229), characters embark on long journeys in eight stories (#013, #108, #066, #075, #076, #088, #118, #142), and characters seek or find treasure in eight stories (#041, #055, #076, #121, #139, #140, #199, #233). Vacations take place in five stories (#030, #120, #132, #143, #215), and characters celebrate birthdays in nine stories (#028, #051, #055, #071, #078, #085, #137, #194, #234). Stormy or snowy weather is a part of 25 stories (e.g., #081, #092, #129, #214), earthquakes impact events in two stories (#114, #183), and volcanoes erupt in five stories (#027, #098, #145, #167, #226). People being poisoned (#142, #155, #232), people having secret identities (#082, #107, #137, #183, #186), people consulting spell books (#066, #112), people being stranded (#012, #072, #098), statues coming to life (or vice versa; #066, #073, #112), and jewelry heists (#023, #030, #199) are other events that occur repeatedly throughout the stories.

Rurality and Place

In this section, I describe the ways in which students reflected rurality in their stories, focusing primarily (but not exclusively) on the stories to which I assigned rurality ratings of 4, 5, and 6.

Settings

As I read through the entire data set for the third time, I made note of each instance in which a rural setting was suggested through the presence of natural elements (e.g., mountains, creeks, farmland). By far, the natural setting mentioned most often in the data was "woods" or "forest," with 42 stories involving these places. Six stories mentioned mountains; eight stories mentioned caves; six stories mentioned open areas of land (e.g., meadows, fields); six stories mentioned trails; nine stories mentioned small bodies of water (e.g., ponds, lakes); 12 stories mentioned farms or farmland; and three stories mentioned gardens. I also noted 20 occasions when communities in which characters lived or visited were referred to as towns, small towns, villages, or neighborhoods—places that may connote rurality.

I grouped the remaining settings, which I did not consider to be reflections of rural places, into the following categories. First, there were 34 stories that took place "at home" without any indication of where that home might be located. Similarly, there were 38 stories that took place "at school," and there were seven stories to which I assigned the code "setting unclear" because there was nothing to indicate where the events took place. In fact, in my notes for Story #192, I wrote, "there's not really a setting because this is not really a story," and I found that to be the case for two other submissions (#121, #164) that did not include a discernable setting—there was no real plot either. Nine stories took place on islands, six stories took place at the beach, and 10 stories involved the ocean or sea. (Note: One of the districts

whose students wrote the fiction stories was located in a seaside community, so an ocean setting *could* have indicated a reflection of "home," but only one story among the ten involving oceans was written by a student from that community. Ironically, the ocean setting about which this student wrote was actually on the opposite coast, in California.) All or part of 25 stories took place in big cities; four stories (#007, #050, #207, #208) took place on military bases or battlefields; 18 stories took place in "kingdoms"; 14 stories took place in fantasy worlds; five stories took place in the world of a video game; and two stories took place in outer space.

Additionally, there were 25 times I used the code "places around town" to indicate when story characters visited hospitals (#051, #071, #078, #083, #138); stores and malls (#005, #026, #186, #234); restaurants (#017, #043, #073, #096, #157, #200, #239); a zoo (#219); a veterinarian clinic (#006); an animal shelter (#203); a local playground (#081); a track (#205, #220); a basketball court (#231); a library (#059); and an inn (#107).

Real Place Names. Students mentioned actual names of cities, states, countries, and continents across the stories. I counted 48 references to places in the United States such as Los Angeles (#074), Hawaii (#007, #228), Florida (#016, #193, #212, #214), Washington, D.C. (#016, #043, #132, #148), Seattle (#072, #132), and the very popular New York City (#008, #030, #062, #069, #083, #132, #133, #212, #214). In a few stories, students used the actual names of their hometowns (#077, #195, #214, #227). There were also 33 references to real locations outside the United States, like Mexico (#040), London (#167), Paris (#023, #044, #118), Germany (#168, #207), Australia (#098, #132), Argentina (#076, #235), and the Bahamas (#076).

Fictional Place Names. Thirteen stories included fictional place names that sounded realistic, such as Skyville, Minnesota (#134), Firesburg, USA (#040), Hanfed (#031), and Fort

Baxter (#208). Twenty-one stories included fictional place names that sounded fantastical, such as Unicorpia (#048), Magical Meadows (#073), Hill Valley Kingdom (#185), Meowtown (#057), and Kittyville (#075), with several of the fictional names coming from movies or books (Camp Demigod and Camp Apollo, from the *Percy Jackson* series (Riordan, 2005-2011), #015 and #016; Diagon Alley from the *Harry Potter* series (Rowling, 1997-2007), #110; and Oz from *The Wizard of Oz* (Baum, 1900), #113).

Depictions of Rural Life

In this section, I will describe the things students included in their stories that reflected place and rurality. First, I will show how characters participated in activities (e.g., farming, hunting) and used vernacular that aligned with activities and vernacular unique to the specific rural regions in which they resided. Next, I will share how some of the stories presented an idealized view of rurality and how four stories seemed to address—indirectly—challenges with which people in rural places tend to struggle.

Rural Activities. Across the data, there were four stories in which characters go fishing (#058, #071, #143, #218); seven stories involving hunting (#046, #072, #077, #088, #185, #236, #238); two stories that include foraging for food (#157, #236), six stories about camping (#068, #157, #168, #213, #216, #225), and three stories that describe farm chores (#092, #093, #206).

Regional Vernacular. While reading the stories, I noted phrasing or dialogue that seemed to reflect regional vernacular, and I found such instances in 28 stories. For example, there were three stories in which a character referred to someone as “boy” (#098), “Ol’ boy” (#196), or “Sonny boy” (#226). Twice, characters replied to their mothers with, “Yes, ma’am” (#107, #234), which feels both formal and southern. In four stories (#188, #189, #216, #218), characters mentioned eating “supper,” which sounded more rural than eating “dinner” would

have (perhaps especially to me because my father-in-law, who is from the same small Minnesota town as Laura Ingalls Wilder, always makes sure to point how odd it sounds to him when others mention "dinner" as the evening meal). Story characters use rural-sounding names for their parents and grandparents in three stories ("Pop," #138; "Mamaw," #190; "Ma and Pa," #193). Instead of "shouting" or "calling," characters in four stories "holler" to make their voices heard (#007, #039, #046, #103). In four stories (#006, #073, #100, #128), characters use the word "y'all" in dialogue, which feels quintessentially rural and/or southern. Katie, the protagonist of Story #092, describes how she "mucked" her horses' stalls as part of taking care of them, and the narrator of Story #227 discusses cats as being "eligible and fertile," phrasing which seems distinctly farm-oriented. In Story #201, Farmer Joe says he lives "up the road on the right" and continues to direct the driver "right up here on the right," turns of phrase which seem regional to me.

Story #179 is set in the present day, as evidenced by the characters' use of cell phones, but the protagonist needs to retrieve a friend's notebook from the "schoolhouse," a choice of words that, since it is not historical, could be considered rural. There are two occasions where a sea captain uses vernacular to reflect his trade (calling someone "matey," #197; saying, "ah, I see what ye are talking about," #011), and in Story #072, after their homeland is left desolate following an apocalypse, the protagonists decide to move to Seattle because "that was where *their people* went to live" (emphasis added). Additionally, the author of Story #006 illustrates that the veterinarian who looks after Allison's dog, Elly, is part of a rural community with the following care instructions:

> "She ain't gonna be able to walk for several weeks, ya' hear me!"
>
> "Yes, Vet Will," Allison replied hurriedly.

> "Y'all can go home to let your dog Elly rest, BUT, carry herz wherever you go, got it?" he said loudly. (#006)

When I typed the stories originally, I used low-level inferences to correct simple mistakes (i.e., fixing spelling and punctuation errors) so as not to be distracted by them when evaluating story quality and content. So, when I arrived at these sentences in Story #196, I instinctively started to correct "grabbed him a Coca-Cola" to "grabbed a Coca-Cola":

> Fred opened the fridge and sighed. *Ahhh . . . that fresh air feels good.* He looked and grabbed him a Coca-Cola and poured his pal some clear cold water. (#196)

I realized, though, that the author's insertion of the word "him" in the third sentence was not a mistake—it was simply a reflection of the child's dialect. Subsequently, I began to notice that several more narrators were using the phrasing "we was" (e.g., "we was so excited" (#217), "we was in a city" (#212)). Initially, I simply changed these instances to "we were" to reflect what I thought of as "proper" grammar, but I became aware that, again, these students were not making mistakes; rather, they were reflecting speech patterns common to their communities. Tellingly, the only students who used such phrasing attended school in an extremely remote Appalachian community, which indicates a geographically-tied vernacular.

Chapter Summary

With this chapter, I have provided a rich description of the data to help discover the possibilities for writing instruction when fourth-grade students are taught using a place-based language arts curriculum. Students wrote stories of various lengths in multiple genres. Regarding story topics, recurring themes included personal relationships, bullying, heroism, death and violence, race/ethnicity, teenage life, technology, sports, and religion. Students incorporated ideas found in literature they read as part of the curriculum as well as from other books, movies, and video games. In terms of story elements, I addressed students' use of story conventions (openings and closings, addresses to the reader, chapters, and sudden transitions); story devices

(teleportation, foreshadowing, surprise twists, “it was all just a dream, morality); advanced vocabulary; language play (alliteration, simile, hyperbole, graphemic symbolism, onomatopoeia, amusing names); dialogue; characterization; rich descriptions and story language; themes/motifs; and reflections of rurality and place. In the following chapter, I present the thematic understandings constructed as a result of this comprehensive analysis of the data.

Chapter Five

Findings

In this chapter, I present thematic understandings constructed from rigorous analyses of the data described in the previous chapter. In that chapter, I provided an exhaustive description of the story themes that existed among the data, the story conventions and devices used, the genres in which students wrote, and students' reflections of rurality and place. Here, I make use of those nuanced descriptions related to plot, characterization, place, rurality, and so on in order to draw conclusions about students' mastery of writing skills and the influence of students' understanding of place upon their stories. While the students' stories were unique in the sense that they were created by individual students with their own distinct relationships to these concepts, they also collectively represent thematic understandings about the possibilities for elementary writing instruction. As such, in this chapter I provide findings related to the two subquestions for this study. First, I discuss findings related to the subquestion, *What elements of narrative fiction writing can fourth graders use successfully?* Next, I detail findings related to the second subquestion, *How do rural fourth graders demonstrate a connection to place in their narrative fiction writing?* Collectively, these findings respond to the overarching question, *What can an analysis of narrative fiction stories written by rural fourth graders taught using a place-based language arts curriculum reveal about the possibilities for elementary writing instruction?* In the final chapter, I move into further abstraction to discuss these findings in view of their implications for writing instruction.

Fourth Graders' Successful Use of Narrative Fiction Elements

In this section, I discuss the following themes that emerged from the data regarding students' successful use of narrative fiction elements: (a) Students' writing met and exceeded

learning standards; (b) Students' writing suggested avid readership; and (c) Students' writing demonstrated agency.

Theme One: Students' Writing Met and Exceeded Learning Standards

In the early elementary grades, literacy educators teach personal narrative writing to help students get used to the process of forming words and sentences and crafting them into cohesive messages that can be read by others. As students age, the emphasis in writing instruction may shift to providing opportunities for self-expression and creativity (Calkins, 2003; Graves, 1983) and with practice, students become more adept at communicating messages through writing (Burrell & Beard, 2018; Koutsoftas, 2018; McKeough & Genereux, 2003). This study demonstrated that fourth-grade children are capable of achieving a high level of skill in narrative fiction writing. In fact, after having been taught the elements of fiction, many student authors crafted stories with complicated plots, complex characters, realistic dialogue, sophisticated language, and rich descriptions. These findings support the conclusions of Burrell and Beard (2018) who described the ability of students of a similar age to write complex plots adhering to a five-part narrative framework including introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Further, students in this study used cleverness and tenderness to convey stories that were interesting, entertaining, heartwarming, and sometimes heart-wrenching.

A look at the Standards of Learning (SOLs) for Virginia (where the majority of the participants resided; Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2017; see Appendix J) shows that many of these student writers have mastered—and gone far beyond—expectations for fourth graders in terms of writing skills. For example, the SOLs require students to "write focusing on the written expression domain features of word choice, specific vocabulary, and sentence variety," and many students demonstrated the ability to do so in their stories. As an example, I

include the following excerpt from Story #107, *Magic Is Real,* in which the protagonist, Kloe, has just learned (from a talking bunny she meets after teleporting into a fantasy world) that she possesses magic powers:

> I just stood there frozen in fear. I knew I had to say something, but I didn't know what. Then thankfully [the bunny] said, "Well, has anything weird ever happened to you?"
>
> So after about two minutes I said, "W-well I guess s-something has happened before. I maybe, well, once when I was reading, I flipped the page without touching the book, but I'm sure it was um, um, just the wind."
>
> The bunny said, "And *I'm* sure it was not just the wind." (#107)

The writer of this story uses a variety of sentences to communicate Kloe's stunned reaction to this discovery. She is "frozen in fear," a metaphor for someone being so overtaken with emotion it is as if they are "frozen" and cannot move. The dialogue between Kloe and the bunny helps us realize—at the same time Kloe does—that her previous "weird" experiences were more than coincidental. She tries to make excuses ("I'm sure it was um, um, just the wind"), but in her repetition of "um," we see that she is starting to doubt the words even as she says them. When the bunny replies, the author italicizes the word "*I'm"* to emphasize to Kloe, and to the reader, that he is the one who actually knows the real answer. He doesn't spell it out pedantically by saying something like, *No, it wasn't the wind, it was the magical powers you didn't know you had*, but he lets her—and us—come to that realization in a much more nuanced, interesting way.

Further, because many students were able to successfully *use* many of the reading skills required by the SOLs in their writing (e.g., "describe how the choice of language, setting, and characterization contributes to the development of a plot"; VDOE, 2017; see Appendix J), they demonstrated a high level of mastery of those skills in addition to those listed in the standards for

writing. I include an example of how a young author follows the classic writing advice of "show, don't tell," in this excerpt from Story #197, *The Ol' Cracken:*

> The men were soggy, water pouring down their faces. After his tentacles were knotted so badly that he couldn't move, they aimed their weapons. Cannon balls flooded the air and water. Swords were thrust at the beast. War hammers flung. Gradually, the helpless creature sank into the sea, and everything was calm. The wind and rain stopped. The clouds moved away and the moon appeared. (#197)

Instead of just telling the reader that the men fighting the giant sea creature were getting wet, the author *shows* it by saying that the water was "pouring down their faces." In his description of the attack, the author lists several ways they tried to conquer him (with swords, cannons, war hammers), each sentence progressively shorter to add a sense of urgency. When the villagers eventually succeed in killing the beast, the author does not say this directly; rather, with sophistication, he *shows* that the beast has died by describing how it "sank into the sea." In just this short passage, the author uses two different phrases to refer to the "Ol' Cracken": first, he is called "the beast," but after he's conquered, the author refers to him as "the helpless creature," showing a shift in perception of him now that he has been defeated and no longer represents a threat to the people fighting him. Finally, the author presents a change in weather to indicate the mood of the town after their collective nightmare of being tormented by a giant sea creature has ended: whereas they had been battling the monster in the midst of a violent thunderstorm, the rain stops and the skies clear after his death, allowing a sense of calm to be felt in the physical world as well as in the hearts of the town's relieved citizens. This passage consisted of just 65 words of the 831-word story, which demonstrated throughout that the author has internalized the reading skills fourth graders are expected to have (the ability to "describe how the choice of language, setting, and characterization contributes to the development of a plot") to such a degree that he was able to use them quite impressively in his story.

Flashback. An example of how one student exceeded the expected standards for fourth-grade writers was the use of flashback in Story #038. McKeough and Genereux (2003) showed how student writers begin to write more complex plots that include meaningful flashbacks as they age and gain practice with fiction writing. The student authors in this study, though, have not yet reached the developmental stage in which the use of flashbacks would be expected, nor were they taught how to use flashbacks to provide information about characters during the Fiction unit. Still, there was one writer who very skillfully weaved in a flashback scene that revealed a glimmer of humanity in the character of Jane, the evil twin who has been terrorizing her community for over a thousand years. Jane is described as a ruthless killer who brutally tortures her victims to such an extent that she has become a greatly-feared legend. Yet, we see a vulnerable side to Jane as she tries to make her way to her brother Jamie's house to carry out an evil plan against him:

> His house was seven miles away, and Jane never drove a car, for fear of being caught, so she walked or ran everywhere. As she started to run though, hail started to fall. *Will I ever make it to Jamie's house?* Jane thought. *After all, I'm not that great of a maneuverer. And I'm not very capable. . . .*
>
> "I'm a very capable person!" Jane exclaimed. "Well then, how come I haven't caught Jamie yet?" Jane felt something pricking at her eyes. What was that? She realized it was tears. That last time she had felt that was when she had been separated from Jamie, at twelve.
>
> "No!" Jane had cried as Jamie disappeared from her view.
>
> "Stop!" Jane scolded herself. "Don't dwell on the past!" Jane sprinted on. (#038)

Jane's inner voice is causing her to doubt herself, and her apparent insecurities about not being able to overcome the prophecy that keeps Jamie alive rise to the surface. In her vulnerable state, she flashes back to a time of great hurt, when she was separated from her brother at a tender age. It seems that Jane must have developed a life of sheer evil to protect herself from those feelings of loss that, apparently, can still emerge at times despite her extreme efforts to

bury them. As a nine- or ten-year-old, it is quite impressive that this writer was able to convey so much about Jane's character in this scene.

Theme Two: Students' Writing Suggested Avid Readership

As described in Chapter Four (pp. 115-116), students' writing contained many references to both classic and modern works that were part of the Promoting PLACE curriculum. For example, activities for Lesson 1 included reading and discussing a passage from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland,* and at least five stories contained events very similar to those that happen in the book (e.g., characters falling down deep holes into other worlds, characters drinking potion that transforms them, characters waking up after strange experiences to discover they had been dreaming). In Lesson 11, as another example, activities revolved around reading and discussing *The Queen Bee* (Grimm & Grimm, 1886), and at least three stories contained plots very similar to the classic fairy tale.

Because the stories analyzed also made frequent references to classic and modern works of fiction that were not included in the curriculum (see pp. 116-118), findings support other research indicating that talented writers tend to be avid readers (Garrett & Moltzen, 2011; Horst, 2016; Olinghouse, 2008; Olthouse, 2012a, 2012b, 2014; Sénéchal et al., 2018). For example, two classmates wrote stories set in the fictional world created by Rick Riordan in his popular *Percy Jackson* series (2005-2011), which itself borrowed characters from Greek and Roman mythology. In Story #016, a group of young people attends Camp Demigod, a camp for burgeoning gods and goddesses, and ends up leading an epic battle against mythological monsters. In Story #015, the same cast of characters (but with one of the other story's minor characters as the protagonist) attends Camp Apollo together, where they work to prevent Pandora's Box from opening. My assumption is that there was an exchange of ideas between the

writers of the two stories, but it is possible that they were each separately working from their knowledge of the series. Either way, the children who wrote these stories were undoubtably fans of *Percy Jackson,* and their deep knowledge of the characters and settings of these books suggests they have spent ample time reading them outside of class.

Regarding another example of references to literature not included in the Promoting PLACE curriculum, the author of Story #140 provided a helpful hint to me as researcher by including a note at the end of her story: "Note—This story [was] inspired by *Wings of Fire."* The premise of the story was one that permeated the data. Based on the *Wings of Fire* children's book series by Tui T. Sutherland (2011-), at least seven students wrote about a matriarchal dragon kingdom in which female dragons battle for queenly rule. For example, Story #144 is about a group of dragons who discover a plot to kill the ancient Queen Seastar while doing "historical research" at the Altar of Darkness. To thwart the plan, they travel back in time and warn the queen. In another story (#145), Queen Sandune decides to execute several dragons whom she fears will try to overtake her throne, but spares Soar, a trusted advisor, who nevertheless ends up doing just that. Though I have not personally read these books, an internet search revealed that many of the dragon characters appearing in students' stories (e.g., Soar, Dune, Phantom, Seastar, Scorch) originated from the published series. Incidentally, four of the writers who appropriated these characters were in the same class, which suggests a literacy culture in which students shared or recommended books.

To be sure, the advanced vocabulary and sophisticated story language used by many of the student writers revealed a familiarity with words only available to those who read often and widely. For example, the writer of Story #098 correctly used words like *civilized, fiery, decomposed, frantic, wearily, wrath, snarkily,* and *triumph* in her tale about a mismatched group

of travelers who are stranded on a desert island. She painted a vivid description of the island's dormant volcano erupting as follows: "The 'mountain' exploded. Red, hot lava came ripping down the sides. All seven people were huddled in the boat, unable to start it. Soon enough, animals came diving into the water, swimming away from the volcano's fiery wrath." Another vivid image was created by the author of *Cayley's Crazy Catastrophe* (#098) in her description of what happens when a magic potion that makes people's dreams come true is spilled at school:

> Carley ran up and grabbed the beaker out of Cayley's hands and ran off with it. Everyone chased her out the door and down the hallway. She tripped, and the beaker shattered with the formula beginning to foam out all over the floor. Dreams were coming true all over the place. Michael Jordan walked up the hallway, and a kid that had always wanted to meet him screamed out his name. Chocolate milk started pouring from the sprinkler system as Connor Menter stood with his mouth open, enjoying the moment. It was complete chaos. (#198)

The author makes it very easy to envision this chaotic scene, and her acuity with language at such a young age strongly suggests she is a voracious reader.

Finally, I offer an excerpt from Story #200, *The Trouble Maker,* which describes Tiana's first moments after arriving at the boot camp for troubled youth.

> There was a breeze blowing in the trees. A squirrel caught my attention as it was leaping from tree to tree. A frog jumped on my leg. I shook it off and the teacher, who called herself Major, showed me to my room. I had three roommates: Sara, Hazel, and Candy. They all ran over to me and hugged me. "Get off me!!" I yelled. They all ran back to their beds in fright whispering to each other. (#200)

Whereas with most of the fourth-graders' stories, it is fairly easy to recognize that the writing was done by a child, but as the reader, my experiences with each of the excerpts I shared above is very similar to that I would have with a published children's story. The authors use a variety of sentence lengths, word choices, insertions of dialogue, and descriptions of the exact movements made by characters that help us understand what they are thinking and feeling in the moment, and it is my assertion that the children who were able to write such passages simply *must* have spent a lot of time in books. A discussion of books teachers can recommend to

enhance students' experiences as readers with the goal of elevating their writing is presented in Chapter Six.

Theme Three: Students' Writing Demonstrated Agency

Social Positioning. In their studies, Dobson (2015a, b), Dyson (1997, 2003), Hultin and Westman (2018), and Millard (2005) wrote about the ways students exert agency in their writing by incorporating sociocultural symbols from outside the classroom into their stories, and my study confirmed these findings by describing fourth-grade students' frequent references to video games and movies in their stories. One example of a such a story is *Minecraft Madness,* Story #111, in which a middle school girl attending a meeting of the school's Minecraft (Mojang Synergies, 2009) club gets sucked into the actual game when she opens up her laptop to play. Another example is Story #021, *The City!*, in which a girl suddenly gains superhero powers by inadvertently touching a mysterious cape. She then runs into Batman, who recognizes her newfound powers and invites her to join the Justice League (Snyder, 2017).

In their study, Hultin and Westman (2018) perceived one of the male students to be positioning himself as a classroom "rebel" by incorporating violent content from video games into his story when doing so was generally discouraged in school. In a similar way, many of the students whose writing I examined also incorporated violence into their stories (both boys and girls—there were many examples from both), perhaps, in part, due to a similar—albeit unconscious—effort at social positioning. For example, in the story about "Mystery," a girl who helps a prince and his mother defeat his father, the evil king, Mystery's arm is sliced off with a sword by one of the king's defenders (#036). A classmate of this author wrote a story in which two bullies are lured to a desolate location and "sliced in half" by a robotic device made by their former victims (#032), but only after the male bully, Jim, has his arm sliced off by the robot. It is

possible, then, that the two writers inspired one another to include such similar violent actions in their stories, or perhaps there was even a bit of competition among classmates to include the most gruesome details.

Conversely, Hultin and Westman (2018) described how another student positioned herself as a "good girl" by including a morality lesson in her story, and in the same way, several of the stories I read also included morals (#033, #104, #173, #180, #182, #183, #186, #188). For example, sisters April and May in Story #188, *My Forever Home,* find a lost puppy and decide to take her home with them. Knowing their parents are against the idea of getting a dog, they decide to hide the puppy in the garage until they find a way to convince their parents they are responsible enough to keep her. Soon overwhelmed by caretaking tasks, the girls confess to their mother, who reveals she has known about their secret all along and was waiting to see if they would admit the truth. Because they do, the mother agrees to let them keep the puppy, "and the girls realized honesty was always the best." Incidentally, the authors of all eight morality stories were girls, suggesting that girls this age may have more motivation to be viewed as being of high moral stature. Also, three of the morality stories (#180, #182, #183) were written by girls in the same class, further suggesting the social influence on their respective decisions to craft this type of narrative.

Vicarious Experiences. Dobson (2015b) described the way creative writing can empower students by providing opportunities for them to act as participants in different "figured worlds" (Holland et al., 1998) with identities separate from those they assume in real life. That is, students can imagine, through their characters, what it would be like to be a different person living in a different place or time. Jean Craighead George, the author of *My Side of the Mountain* (1959), a novel featured in the Promoting PLACE curriculum, expressed this sentiment in the

author's note accompanying her book. As a child, she had always dreamed of running away to "live off the land," but because it was not feasible for her to do so in real life, she allowed herself to have this adventure vicariously through her character, Sam. Many of the students in my study used the writing opportunity to imagine and explore what it would be like to be teenagers, royalty, animals, heroes, city-dwellers, and, occasionally, someone of the opposite gender. They were able to ascribe agency to characters who stood up to bullies and who saved people's lives, and they could make their stories end "happily ever after" even though things in their own lives may have been more complicated, in this way "exerting some control over a sometimes confusing and precarious world" (Dyson, 2013, p. 76).

Grief and Loss. In many stories, students explored powerful emotions surrounding loss. For example, Story #205 begins as a triumphant tale of an athlete, Jack, who works extremely hard across many years to improve his running to the point that he is finally able to best his rival in an important race. Yet before he can savor his victory, the plot shifts dramatically to a tragic account of the healthy young man being stricken with a terminal illness:

> After a few emotional phone calls, everyone knew about Jack's condition. The doctor not only found a broken leg, but a hidden sickness. The drive home was the moment when it really hit him. Jack only had three months left, and he knew how he was going to spend it, with his friends and family. (#205)

The author seems to make a statement about what is truly important in life: treasured moments with loved ones. He paints a touching scene at the end, where Jack's family finds him "sleeping peacefully in his bed," and they are "broken" at the realization that he is no longer with them. The young author has orchestrated a peaceful and loving death for Jack, perhaps unconsciously revealing what he feels to be an ideal way to meet the eventual fate that is inevitable for all of us. Though this writer had the choice of any topic, his decision to address death in this way suggests

it is a concept he is grappling with in his own mind, and writing this story provided the chance to explore his complicated feelings in a unique, creative way.

In some cases, students who wrote about loss used a kind of "escape mechanism," perhaps to avoid having to process the painful emotions fully. For example, in Story #074, Crissy faces an enormous life change when her parents announce the family is moving to Los Angeles. Early in the story, the narrator describes Crissy by stating, "One of Crissy's personal school rules is to trust nobody, but she kind of broke that rule by having a best friend. . . . Crissy tells Carmella almost anything and everything." It is unclear why Crissy set that rule for herself, but it reveals vulnerability, and the fact that she trusts Carmella despite her self-protective stance helps explain why Crissy feels particularly upset at the prospect of moving away from her. A powerful—yet illogical—decision by the author allows Crissy and Carmela to stay together: as it turns out, Carmela's family also happens to be moving to Los Angeles, and they can continue going to school together every day.

Story #151 also deals with the emotions involved with being separated from a friend. When Kayla's friend Mellisa moves to China, she keeps it a secret until after she is already gone. Kayla is initially shocked, which we can tell because almost all of the words she speaks during a phone call with Mellisa are written in all-capital letters. Instead of dwelling on surprise and sadness, however, Kayla quickly turns to the matter at hand: choosing an outfit for the first day of high school the next day. Perhaps the author of this story also wanted to avoid the sad feelings surrounding moving, or maybe she just wanted to talk more about teenage fashion, which she does for the remainder of the story in a manner similar to the 8- and 9-year-old writers studied by Millard (2005).

An extremely touching moment concludes Story #162, a very dramatic, realistic account of a child rescuing his or her entire family during a housefire. The father is the last one to make it out of the house, and the protagonist kneels beside him, praying for him to resume breathing. Miraculously, the father opens his eyes and thanks his child, saying, "I knew you could do it." However, instead of letting that story and its powerful emotions stand, the author—a boy—reveals that the entire experience had only been a dream. Perhaps this writer's avoidance of the emotions stirred when considering the near-loss of a loved one was related to his social positioning within his rural community, where behavior seen as masculine (e.g., remaining stoic in the presence of grief) is highly valued (Azano, 2011). This interpretation aligns with Dobson's (2015a, b) study of slightly older boys' writing practices, whom Dobson perceived to assert their "hegemonic masculinity" through their authorial choices.

Fourth Graders' Demonstrations of Connections to Place in Their Narrative Fiction Writing

In this section, I discuss the following themes regarding place and rurality that emerged from the data: (a) Students' writing contained explorations of place-related identity concepts; (b) Students' writing reflected idealized views of rural communities and natural surroundings; (c) Students' writing indirectly referenced challenges affecting rural people; and (d) Students' writing exhibited stereotypical and non-stereotypical representations of rural masculinity.

Theme Four: Students' Writing Contained Explorations of Place-Related Identity Concepts

After participating in a place-based language arts curriculum across four semesters (students received instruction in the Poetry and Fairy Tale units in third grade and the Research and Fiction units in fourth grade), 43% of students in this study reflected their local communities and natural settings in their stories, suggesting that they consider place to be an important part of

their worldview. For example, some students incorporated regional vernacular into their stories, revealing how they have internalized an understanding of how language variances can situate their stories within a particular geographic location. One such student was the writer of Story #006, *Allyson & Elly*, who wrote just one character's lines using an identifiable regional dialect (the veterinarian taking care of the dog protagonist used words like "ain't," "herz," and "y'all), revealing her mature appreciation of how this choice of words would affect the readers' perceptions of this character as a distinctly rural (or perhaps "country") veterinarian. Other students engaged their characters in patently rural activites. In Story #181, for example, characters dress in camoflague and play "Airsoft War," a battle simulation game popular in rural areas where players use realistic-looking toy guns to shoot small plastic pellets at other players (Joffe-Walt, 2008).

Rural Values. With another story, *The Meaning of the Necklace* (#183), a young author promotes the virtue of an honest day's labor, a value typically embraced as part of rural culture (Azano, 2011). The story's two princess characters extoll the virtues of hard, physical work "in the fields" when, during a long search for a magic necklace that would transform one of them into the queen of the land, they stop to live "alongside all the poor people" for a while, then decide to stay permanently. The people they meet in the humble village treat the princesses with kindness and teach them to appreciate a simpler way of life.

Rural Skills. Similarly, the author of Story #185, *Hill Valley Kingdom,* embeds rural values into a story about a dedicated royal servant who uses his rural knowledge to forge his way past multiple wilderness obstacles in order to fulfill his duty to protect the king during a hostile takeover by an evil warlock. Before embarking on his treacherous journey, Brandon thinks to grab his cloak, his bow and arrow, a "deer knife" and some leftover deer meat. He uses the meat

to distract a hungry wolf, the knife to kill some ominous snakes, and the cloak to protect his body from angry bees; when some of the bees do end up stinging him, he uses "salve from a thistle" to ease the pain. Upon arriving at the castle, Brandon steadies his bow and arrow, draws back, and aims for the evil warlock's amulet, which he hits on the first try, saving the day for the whole kingdom. Clearly, by sharing such detailed descriptions of his characters' ability to navigate through the woods using hunting tools and a keen understanding of the plants and animals he encounters, the author communicates his appreciation for these representations of his own rural place.

Moving Disrupts a Sense of Place. Students also explored place-related concepts through their choices of events to include in their stories. Across the data set, there were multiple stories in which a character is moving or has just moved to a new place, and in each situation, characters either struggle to say goodbye to the place they lived or struggle to adjust to the new place. For example, in Story #240, *The Turn on the Bullies,* Bob is a boy whose family has moved repeatedly, and on his first day of school in their new town, he witnesses a group of bullies harassing another student. In that moment, Bob chooses to align himself with the boy who was bullied rather than the group of bullies, thereby asserting agency by choosing to shape his role in his new place into that of protector. In some stories, (e.g., Story #151, described in the previous section, p. 151), it is the protagonist's friend who moves away, and the anxiety felt by the character left behind demonstrates another way in which students feel the people around them shape their sense of place. Without the home and people they are used to, their characters feel lost, and they need to find a way to construct a sense of connectedness to their new place. The fact that so many children chose to depict a change in place as a primary conflict in their stories shows another way in which these student writers demonstrated a connection to place.

Sudden Shifts in Place. Additionally, there were dozens of instances in the data where characters suddenly move from one place to another via teleportation. For example, in Story #132, Ruby is on vacation with her father when she falls through a portal, eventually landing in "some type of mystical land." Similarly, in Story #066, Julie meets a fairy in the woods and follows her to a tree that turns out to be a portal to a magical world. In each case, the character who has teleported feels unease at his or her sudden shift in place and must quickly adjust. In most of these stories, the characters have an adventure in this new place, then eventually return to the safety and familiarity of home.

Theme Five: Students' Writing Reflected Idealized Views of Rural Communities and Natural Surroundings

Idealized Depictions of Communities. Azano (2011) described how one rural English teacher and his students shared an idealized view of their community, with the teacher explaining that the community is made up of "neighbors, family members, and friends who are readily available to lend help when it is needed," people who are friendly and who always greet each other with a wave. Several students depicted the communities in their stories in a similar manner, like in Story #134, when the narrator describes the fictional small town of Skyville, which was "known for everybody to be happy and kind." Similarly, the narrator of Story #031 sets the scene for the story as follows:

> Long ago, it was a normal day in the town of Hanfed. The newspaper boy was in the middle of his morning shift, every townsperson was out greeting each other even if they did not know the person they were greeting. The town of Hanfed was a small town right next to the woods. It had a population of only about 60 people, so when a woman in the town had a baby, everyone would come to the baby shower. (#031)

The description of the whole community gathering for a baby shower is strikingly similar to the way Heath (1983) describes women of all generations gathering to shower new mothers with gifts and advice in her classic ethnography of two rural communities.

In Story #197, Captain Gray Beard gathers the community at "the tallest conifer tree on the island" to discuss how to solve the problem of the "Ol' Cracken" who has been attacking ships for years: "At around 7:30, everyone from the island showed up, which looked to be about 30 people because it was a very small island." After they pulled together and defeated the sea creature, "They all met back up at the conifer tree for a great celebration. They had a colossal feast. There was music and dancing around a warm fire. They celebrated ['til] into the morning as elation filled the air."

Three more stories (#048, #183, #185) belonging to the fantasy and fairy tale genres included descriptions of lovely communities. Unicorpia, the setting for Story #048, is a "happy forest" full of fluffy pink trees where, "Everyone and everything was so joyful. Nothing was sad or hateful. Everyone got along just fine. It was perfect. Nothing ever went wrong." Story #185 was set in a place where, "King Gregory used his crown for the good of his people and his kingdom. With the help of his crown, he made sure the crops grew, there was enough food for everyone, and no one was sick. The kingdom was peaceful." In Story #183, a pair of princess sisters finds themselves in a "poor village" where "they worked hard, and knew what hunger was, and how life could be so difficult, but people loved them so much that they came to be very happy."

Idyllic Descriptions of Natural Surroundings. Throughout the data set, there were many descriptions of the natural world that reveal its importance to the fourth-grade authors and were reminiscent of the nature stories written by the talented young writer studied by Edmunds

and Edmunds (2005). For example, Sally, in Story #156, loves "to go outside and search in the woods in her backyard. And she [loves] animals so much that she could keep thousands." In Story #066, Kloe describes a "crisp and cool evening" in the forest, where "the sounds of all the critters filled the air, the chirping of the crickets, the croaking of the toads in the pond nearby, and the hooting of the owls hunting." Skillfully, the narrator of Story #170, *The Mythical Forest,* opens with these lines:

> I hear the whistling wind. I feel the grass on my legs and I see the wide spread of forest. As I walk through the dark forest, I hear something rustling in the leaves beside me. As I turn, I watch as a small bunny runs by and hops toward the forest (#170).

One of the loveliest descriptions of nature is found in Story #184, *The Vines Come Alive,* which shows a remarkably strong connection between the author and his natural surroundings:

> I stood on the top of the tall mountain, relishing every minute, every second, every moment. The cool breeze against my face, the wind toying with my umber-colored hair and the warm glow of the sun warming my skin. . . . When I was surrounded by nature, by vines, trees, flowers, valleys, rivers, and the forest teeming with life; when I was far away from everyone. . . .
>
> I sat down. I sat for a long, long time, watching the sun climb slowly up into the sky, its warm glow radiating onto the earth. A rock wren landed beside me, cocking its head. I smiled, watching it as it hopped back and forth before spreading its wings and flying off. I sighed. . . .
>
> My observant eyes and patience caught movements commonly unnoticed. I saw the sparrows collecting twigs and leaves for their nests, leaves falling from trees, squirrels storing nuts for the winter and ants working hard to build homes, bit by bit, one step at a time. (#184)

Finally, the author of Story #236 submitted a piece that was not truly a narrative fiction story containing characters and a plot; rather, it was more of a poem about the changing seasons as experienced in his place. I include an excerpt from the piece, titled *Dew on the Horizon,* because, like the previous story, it demonstrates the closeness this student feels with the outdoor world:

> As the reddish, yellow sun came up on the fall horizon, I saw dew sticking on the ground, the trees, and the faded black panels of my backyard shed. The dew looked like it was dancing on the things it was stuck to. It was one elegant sight indeed. I saw many other great things, squirrels running up and down the trees and birds tending to their young…. The animals are preparing for winter and storing all their food. Soon, they will go to sleep and continue the circle of life. (#236)

Theme Six: Students' Writing Indirectly Referenced Challenges Affecting Rural People

In his influential piece on the critical pedagogy of place, Gruenewald (2003) wrote, "If place-based educators seek to connect place with self and community, they must identify and confront the ways that power works through places to limit the possibilities for human and non-human others. Their place-based pedagogy must, in other words, be critical (p. 7)." In that spirit, I sifted carefully through the data to ascertain whether there was evidence of students approaching narratives influenced by place through a critical lens, and I found four stories that addressed challenges prevalent in rural places. Because I do not know the children who wrote these stories or have any information about their personal life circumstances, I am only able to speculate as to whether the situations presented in the stories might reflect the authors' lived experiences. Like Azano and Biddle (2019), my intention is not to perpetuate deficit ideologies about rural communities, but I recognize the contradiction in that "naming oppressions seems in and of itself operating from a place of loss" (p. 9). Specifically, I hesitate for fear of presenting a stereotypical or deficit view of a community to which I do not belong, and I share these findings with respect and with the acknowledgment that people with different life experiences may interpret these anecdotes in other valid ways.

Story #094, *The Bully*. In this story, the protagonist, Frankie, is clearly going through a hard time. Her father has recently died under circumstances unknown to the reader, and when her mother is unable to find a job where they used to live, they are forced to move elsewhere. This situation rings true for people living in rural places, where lack of employment opportunity is a

frequent concern (Azano, 2011; Burney & Cross, 2006; Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2009; McInerney et al., 2011; Sherman & Sage, 2011; Smith, 2002; Smith & Sobel, 2010). Moreover, the adjustment to her new school is difficult for Frankie, who becomes the target of a bully. Emily torments Frankie in various ways, including making "mean jokes" about her family, "especially [her] dad." It seems strange that someone like Emily would say cruel things about a new classmate's recently-deceased parent, whom she would not have known. Yet with the opioid crisis that has drastically afflicted U.S. communities in recent years, particularly in certain rural regions (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Hazlett, 2018; Macy, 2018; Rigg et al., 2018), causing many people to die at young ages, it occurs to me that students like the writer of Story #094 are likely all-too familiar with parental deaths (though, of course, there are many other reasons why students may have experienced death in their lives, both in reality and through video games, movies, etc.). Frankie's mother, who would certainly be dealing with her own feelings of grief and loss, is ineffective at helping her daughter handle her problem with Emily. When she reports the bullying to her mom, she tells her to say, "'Stop it. It is rude!'" Frankie tries to follow this advice, but Emily "always [says] no" when Frankie pleads with her to stop making the hurtful comments.

Story #005, *Hillbilly Joe*. The narrator and protagonist of this story begins with an introduction of a local legend that is shown to be "real" during the story, then introduces himself as follows: "Call me Stinky Joe. At least, that's what the others call me. They're city people, I live in the mountains. The others think I'm crazy. They won't listen to me." I found this statement enlightening because it shows that the writer perceives "city people" as viewing "hillbillies" like Stinky Joe in a negative light and as people not to be believed. It is the "city people," in fact, who assign the pejorative name to Joe, yet as narrator, Joe makes an active

choice to share this unflattering nickname with the reader. The story continues with a description of how Joe figures out what is going on after two men, in separate incidents, are knocked to the ground when there was no one or nothing around except, in each case, a tree. Because he is familiar with the legend, Joe realizes the tree has come to life, and to prevent it from attacking anyone else, he gets his chainsaw and cuts the tree apart. The story ends with this scene:

> "Ow!" I yelled, slowly bringing my chainsaw through the bark. CREAK! Its screech split the air. CRASH!
>
> "Now the others will listen to me," I said triumphantly. (#005)

Joe is triumphant because he feels he can finally command the respect of the "others" who discount his rural knowledge. Knowing the legend and being able to use his chainsaw (a tool presumably used often in rural places, where people sometimes live in or near wooded areas) to solve the problem should, in Joe's view, quell the voices of the "city people" who call him names.

Additionally, during the story, Joe encounters the second man to be attacked by a tree while shopping for groceries at Wal-Mart, which is often the closest large retail outlet people in rural areas can access (Eppley, 2015; Irwin & Clark, 2006; Monroe, 2015):

> As I enter the building, I see something very disturbing. There is a fight going on with the manager and a poor beggar with crazy hair, worn out jeans, and a short-sleeve shirt with rips and tears.
>
> "Just because you're poor doesn't mean you have the right to steal!" the manager boomed.
>
> "You will never get me alive!" the beggar screamed. (#005)

The students in this study all attend rural schools in high-poverty areas, and as such, it is likely the writer has encountered people who, because they lack financial resources, may appear unkempt like the "poor beggar" in this story. It is unclear whether the author sympathizes with the beggar, who may be suffering from hunger and feels stealing food from a large corporation is

his only option, or with the store manager, who makes a valid point that from an ethical standpoint, stealing could be considered wrong no matter the circumstances.

Story #115, *The Night Before Christmas Eve.* In Chapter Four, I described the story of Jesse, a girl with a great deal of adult responsibility. Her mother is resting at a time of day that Jesse and her younger sister are awake, which suggests she might work odd hours, leaving Jesse to care for her sister's needs. The day before Christmas Eve, Jesse inquires about whether her mother might get to come home early the next day, and she replies, "'Maybe. Let me check with my boss.'" Most likely, then, Jesse's mom has a low-wage job, perhaps in food service or retail, that does not allow her the flexibility of scheduling time off in advance so she can spend the holiday with her family. The "maybe" at the beginning of her response implies she has not yet thought about what Christmas Eve night might look like for her family. Jesse takes it upon herself to buy the Christmas stockings for herself and her sister, but she seems to keep it a secret from her mother. The narrator does not reveal why Jesse chooses not to tell her mom about getting the stockings, but I wonder if it was to avoid making her feel guilty about not having taken care of this task—definitely a parent's responsibility, not a child's—before then. Certainly by December 23rd, most parents who celebrate Christmas would have already thought to obtain stockings for their children, but in deciding to take care of it herself, Jesse seems to understand that her mother is preoccupied with other things. Perhaps being a single parent—supporting two children on a low-wage salary—weighs down on Jesse's mom in such a way that makes Jesse, clearly a very sensitive and responsible child, long to alleviate her struggle.

Story #078, *One Birthday.* In Story #078, the protagonist feels uncomfortable during an encounter with a friend's mother, who exhibits strange behavior at the friend's birthday party:

> When we arrived at Penny's house, her mom said, "Hi, oh you can go set the presents on the kitchen table. Then you can go in the backyard and swim with Penny and our new

> dog, Pops. He's so cute!" She coughed and said, "Oh, sorry. Watch out—never get in his face. He just might . . . BITE! AH!"
>
> I screamed and Penny's mom laughed. I whispered to my mom and said, "I didn't know Penny's mom was going to be crazy. Good thing I know now. OK, I'm going to the pool with Penny."
>
> My mom said, "OK, Sweetie."
>
> I asked Penny why her mom acts like that. She said, "That's how she is." (#078)

The excerpt I shared of Story #078 consisted of 117 words, exactly half of the story's overall length of 234 words, so clearly this scene was quite important to the author, and I wondered if she might possibly have experienced a similar encounter with an adult in real life. In reading the description of Penny's mother's behavior, I thought once again of the opioid crisis rampant in rural communities like the ones in which these student writers lived. Drug abuse, unfortunately, is a part of life in rural places, and I wondered if this mother's behavior could be attributed to that disease.

As I have mentioned, I hesitate to "accuse" a story character of being addicted to drugs just because the author is known to live in a rural place. In this case, however, I feel I can speak to this connection because every time I read this scene, I am struck by the way the behavior of Penny's mother reminds me intensely of a person I knew in my own childhood, a relative who was, in fact, addicted to drugs and alcohol. The coughing, the sudden shouting, the laughter when nothing is funny—though I have only seen this person twice in the last twenty-five years or so, reading the description of Penny's mom brings memory of her right to the surface. Since this person has not been in my life as an adult, I have a "child's-eye view" of experiences with her, a view that seems to align perfectly with the narrator's. Penny's explanation of her mother's behavior—and her resignation to it—unfortunately also reminds me of my relative's daughter,

and I know that having had a mother who was addicted to drugs has affected her in profoundly negative ways.

In the story, Penny and Petter go outside to run around with "Pops," despite Petter's hesitation. Sure enough, when Petter bends down to pet him, Pops bites him, and he winds up in the hospital. To conclude the story, Petter says, "I'm never ever going back there," a sentiment to which I can certainly relate.

Theme Seven: Students' Writing Exhibited Stereotypical and Non-Stereotypical Representations of Rural Masculinity

Several stories in the data involve hunting (a stereotypically masculine activity), and in one of them, Story #072, the characters hunt out of necessity, not for sport. After battling monsters, sharks, and zombies in a seeming apocalypse, two brothers, along with their mother and Liam, a friend they met during the apocalyptic events, "couldn't buy any food. They had to hunt for food and water, so they hunted a deer. They boiled water from the ocean so they could drink it," and they "gathered up slugs and insects," presumably to eat. At the beginning of the story, the brothers are described as opposites, with Jeff looking like a "country boy" because "he always wore overalls" and Paul looking like a "city boy" because "he wears a fancy black suit and hat" and always wants to "look neat." After the apocalypse, it was Jeff and Liam—not Paul—who did the hunting. The whole episode keenly reminded me of the rural teacher described by Azano (2011), who proudly claimed he would never worry about survival during an economic crisis because:

> I can kill things and eat them. I can just go buy a few calves and raise them and a few hogs. And I can grow all my own vegetables. Like if you're just talking about survival, well, that's not a concern at all. Not only would I be okay, but I'd be able to take care of a whole lot of other people as well. (p. 5)

The teacher referenced a song titled “Country Boy Can Survive” by Hank Williams, Jr. (1982) to illustrate this sentiment, a song—and sentiment—with which the author of Story #072 is likely also familiar.

On the other hand, there were several men in the stories who possessed stereotypical qualities of rural masculinity like those described above, but who were also depicted as being quite loving and nurturing. In Story #077, when a father and son are hunting together, the dad asks the boy why he shot and killed a fox, and when the boy explains he was trying to protect a baby deer, his father tells him, “You have a good heart.” On the first day of the hunting trip, the boy does not manage to kill a buck, but both his father and his uncle do, and their response to the boy is sensitive and encouraging. “After they got all their excitement out, they started to talk to me. They said they were just showing me how to do it and I can get the next one, no matter how big it [is].”

In another story (#040), when the protagonist’s understandably uncomfortable mother snaps at him just hours before giving birth to his little sister, his father steps in, smoothing things over by saying, “Sorry, sweetie” to the boy. In Story #182, *The Princess Who Never Listened,* a single father—the king—is having trouble with his daughter’s misbehavior, and “because her father loved her so much, it hurt his heart to discipline her,” but he does so nonetheless because he knows facing natural consequences is necessary for his daughter’s overall wellbeing. All of these stories suggest that perhaps the younger generation of rural residents may be formulating an updated conception of what it means to be a man in rural society—a conception that is simultaneously strong and gentle.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I detailed seven themes that emerged from the thick description of data presented in Chapter Four and illuminated ways in which students' writing led to understandings about the potential impact of the narrative fiction writing task. In the first part of the chapter, I examined closely the elements of fiction fourth graders were able to use successfully, and in doing so, I showed how students' writing met and exceeded learning standards, suggested avid readership, and demonstrated agency. In the second part, I focused in on how students' writing demonstrated a connection to place, so I discussed how students' writing contained explorations of place-related identity concepts, reflected idealized views of rural communities and natural surroundings, indirectly referenced challenges affecting rural people, and exhibited stereotypical and non-stereotypical representations of rural masculinity. In the concluding chapter, I discuss the implications of my study in light of the theoretical framework comprised of Vygotsky's theory of creativity (1971), his sociocultural theory (1978), and Freire's critical pedagogy (1970), and I offer a set of "possibilities" for students, teachers, and the field of literacy research.

Chapter Six

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate elementary children's narrative fiction writing using the following research question and sub-questions as a guide:

> What can an analysis of narrative fiction stories written by rural fourth graders taught using a place-based language arts curriculum reveal about the possibilities for elementary writing instruction?
>
> - Specifically, what elements of narrative fiction writing can fourth graders use successfully?
> - How do rural fourth graders demonstrate a connection to place in their narrative fiction writing?

With this examination, I have shared a thick description of students' writing in terms of common story themes, common story elements (i.e., conventions and devices), and students' depictions of rurality and place. Using inductive analysis techniques, I then zoomed out from the data to develop thematic understandings in relation to my research questions. In this chapter, I zoom out even further to complete the analytic process by interpreting my findings and discussing how they can be viewed in light of previous research (LeCompte & Preissle, 1994) and through the lenses of Vygotsky's theory of creativity (1971), his sociocultural theory (1978), and Freire's critical pedagogy (1970), which together comprised the theoretical framework for this investigation (see Figure 1, p. 9). My goal was not to create new theory, as in a grounded theory design (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), but to add information to the field that could contribute to theory at a later time.

As such, I discuss in this chapter the possibilities that were revealed during this study and their implications for teachers, students, and the field of literacy research. I discuss limitations of the study and provide suggestions for future iterations as well as other needed research in elementary narrative fiction writing.

Understanding the Possibilities Through the Lens of the Theory of Creativity

> "'Pretend' often confuses the adult, but it is the child's real and serious world, the stage upon which any identity is possible and secret thoughts can be safely revealed." –Vivian Paley, 1990

Vygotsky (1971) theorized that creativity was crucial to the development of both the individual and of the society to which the individual belongs. According to Vygotsky, creative practices like the ones undertaken by student participants in this project allow for growth and change, disrupting societal inertia and forcing us "to strive beyond our life toward all that lies beyond it" (1971, p. 253). Perhaps especially in rural areas, where students might have fewer opportunities to spend time outside their communities, it is especially important to foster creativity in children. Creative projects like the one discussed in this dissertation, then, serve to provide students with opportunities to consider different ways of being and knowing they may not otherwise have. In this section, I discuss how students made creative choices, how they engaged with writing as creative play, and how creativity and skill development were intertwining, reciprocal forces that influenced students' work.

Creative Choices

When given the choice to write any type of story they wanted, students chose to work within many different creative genres, which I described in Chapter Four (see Table 4, p. 78). Other researchers (e.g., Dobson, 2015b; Hultin & Westman, 2018; Millard, 2005) have described writing projects of much more limited scope where the topic was assigned by an adult, and though no side-by-side comparison has been made between the stories written by students across

studies, motivation research (e.g., Jones, 2018) and writing instruction research (e.g., Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001) indicate more learning occurs when students are given choices. Dobson (2015b), for example, described how his intention to offer students more options in their writing assignments was thwarted by school administrators who insisted he assign a particular writing task they deemed more directly related to students' upcoming standardized exams. As a result, Dobson perceived his students to push back against this lack of choice by turning the play script he started for them into a parody. Feeling little ownership over the story idea, the boys in his study did not take the project seriously and, presumably, produced work of lower overall quality than if they had been afforded a choice of subject. Following up a year after the project, Dobson's interviews with the boys revealed they scarcely remembered the "stronger framed" playwriting assignment, whereas they had a lot to say about projects that were "weaker framed" in that they had more choice about what to write (Dobson, 2015a).

In contrast, many of the students in this dissertation study—who were offered the chance to express their creativity in any genre they liked—seemed highly motivated to write, as evidenced by the length and quality of their stories. When looking at the ten most highly-rated stories in the data set (see Table 1, p. 68), five different genres were represented: adventure, fairy tale, fantasy, realistic fiction, and realistic fiction with magical/supernatural elements.

Story #104, *Bootsy Adventures, Book One: Visions,* was the longest and one of the most high-quality stories in the data set. The author wrote this adventure tale from the perspective of an almost-grown kitten, Bootsy, who is coming to terms with life-or-death decisions as she grapples with mysterious visions that haunt her dreams. While imagining the world from the point-of-view of a cat, the author wove a complex story with multiple plotlines, the most significant involving the protagonist witnessing another animal's failure to act bravely on behalf

of someone in danger, spurring her to take the moral high road by stepping into a fight that puts her own young life in peril. In the end, the cat she was trying to defend dies anyway, causing Bootsy to question whether her heroic risk was worthwhile. The author introduced many characters with distinct personalities engaged in noble pursuits—all emerging from her own vivid imagination. If instead of the open-ended writing task assigned as the culminating project of the Fiction unit, the teacher had required the whole class to write from one particular genre—perhaps historical fiction from a time period they were studying in social studies—I am doubtful as to whether this young author, if she were not naturally interested in that type of premise, would have written such an impressive piece of literature.

Writing as Creative Play

In addition to the very long length of some stories that revealed a deep level of dedication, students also showed their motivation to write in the way they had fun with language play, sarcasm in dialogue, plot twists, teleportation, and so much more. Throughout her vast ethnographic research in elementary classrooms, Dyson (e.g., 1997, 2003, 2008, 2013) has repeatedly illustrated the pleasure students feel while participating in a community of writers. After lengthy, sustained observations in multiple classrooms—some of which stifled students' creativity by requiring them to stay silent during writing time—Dyson (2013) recommended that play, talk, and social relations should be the foundation of elementary writing practices. "It is in play that children venture into new social roles, try out new discourses, and negotiate their own possibilities in a world of others," she wrote. "Entering into writing practices entails imagining oneself as having some agency, some resources, and some companions with whom to venture forward" (p. 175). Her advocacy of creative play as a cornerstone of elementary education recalls

the work of Dewey (1985/1916), who wrote that "work which remains permeated with the play attitude is art" (p. 214).

In this dissertation study, I did not observe students during the act of writing, but it is obvious that similar enjoyable experiences were shared amongst the community of writers who produced such stories as *The Adventures of Bobby the Pencil* (Story #199, in which a personified pencil becomes a superhero), *The Singing War* (Story #035, in which two dogs come to school to judge a singing contest between their very off-key owners during recess), *The Adventures of Unicorpia, Book One* (Story #048, in which a unicorn and fairy best-friend duo become embroiled in an epic feud that results in a character transforming into a pink sprinkled donut), and so many more. Many stories were imaginative, playful, and silly. Making learning appealing for students is an ultimate instructional goal, as they will certainly learn more when highly engaged. In fact, Rick Riordan, the former teacher who authored the *Percy Jackson* series that seems to have inspired the writers of Stories #015 and #016, stated in a *New York Times* interview, "My goal in the classroom was always to make sure [students] were having so much fun they didn't realize they were learning" (Rich, 2008), and evidence from the data indicate this goal was accomplished for many of the students in this project.

The Intertwining of Creativity and Skill Development

As reciprocal, intertwining forces, creativity and skill development have the potential to develop synchronously through projects like this one. As students develop literacy skills, they are more able to devote cognitive attention to the creative aspects of writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981). At the same time, this study adds evidence to the notion that practicing writing creatively leads to improvement in writing skills.

Among the data, there were 54 stories (those rated as *3* or higher) that were quite well-written and illuminated the possibilities that exist when instructional time is devoted to creative writing in elementary schools. Twenty-four students produced stories I considered excellent (those rated as *4*), and 10 students wrote stories of absolutely astounding quality (those rated as *5*, or "the best of the best"; see Appendix F). In Chapter Five, I described how the author of *The Vengeful Twins* (#038), for example, included a well-executed flashback revealing past hurts that influenced the villain's evil behavior, even though this skill was not taught as part of the curriculum and McKeough and Genereux (2003) indicated it is rare for someone of this age to be able use flashbacks in their writing. The author also included an impressive poem about the evil protagonist (see p. 133), added vivid imagery about the gruesome nature of her crimes, correctly used at least 21 words which seemed advanced for a fourth-grader's vocabulary (see Table 6, pp. 124-125), and moved seamlessly back and forth between the perspectives of both the good and the evil twin.

There is potential for educators to learn more about the capabilities of young writers so they can hold higher expectations, teach higher-level skills, and encourage students to strive to write creatively like the authors of the stories I designated as "the best of the best." For instance, some students in this study may have been limited by having been given a template on which to write that was more suitable for first-grade writers. It is unclear if and how the template imposed limitations on students' stories, but my assumption is that the teacher who gave this template to students was unaware of its potentially limiting influence—after all, if she had been using this type of template for years, she likely had not witnessed the type of creative writing fourth graders can do when provided blank sheets of paper or a Word document of limitless length that can be added to over time and revised easily. Learning that fourth graders can write as well as

many of the students in this study might encourage teachers to continue working with students on a single piece of writing across many days. With more time and more space, teachers can help students see where characters' motives need clarifying, where problems need more satisfying resolutions, and—when the time is right developmentally—where flashbacks might enhance the reader's understanding of characters' tragic flaws.

Further, this study supports other research showing that literature shared with students as part of their language arts learning makes a difference in their writing, so literacy educators may want to consider curating students' in-school reading experiences in such a way as to inspire the students as writers. It is beneficial to share books in which students are interested, and this study reveals that many rural students are interested in literature with a focus on place. In order to bolster their own repertoires of place-based literature to be able to recommend stories to their students, teachers can consult literacy journals, attend reading conferences, or seek help from school librarians.

Understanding the Possibilities Through the Lens of Sociocultural Theory

> "Writing is never an individual production. Rather, it is always socially organized in cultural time and space, and it is also always a response to a landscape of others' voices."
> –Anne Haas Dyson, 2013

Vygotsky (1978) believed that learning in the individual mind can only take place within a given social context. Students in this study, then, processed literacy learning in the social world of their classrooms, which were each situated within a particular rural community. Other social influences were constantly in play: their experiences with text, their relationships with family and friends, and the ongoing enculturation experienced as they learned to manipulate letters and words into meaningful stories. In this section, I discuss the ways this project provided space for

students to explore complicated social relationships, engage with place as a sociocultural context for learning, and participate in creative writing as a sociocultural practice.

Exploring Complicated Social Relationships

In one study of place-based instructional practices, Wason-Ellam (2010) described gaining greater understanding of the children with whom she worked because of revelations about students' identities that emerged from their collective place-based learning experiences, which then helped her to meet their learning needs more effectively. Though the students in my study were anonymous to me, I was still able to glean a great deal of information about them from their stories (whether the students were funny, sensitive, imaginative, etc.). Their teachers would have been able to gain this knowledge of their students as well, and they could use it to inform instructional practices.

Further, because the act of writing can reveal feelings or beliefs that cannot otherwise be expressed (Hillocks 2007); writing is a valuable tool for adults to gain insights into children's worries and concerns. Throughout this data set, for example, there were dozens of instances of characters dying in both tragic and violent ways. Teachers whose students choose to write about death—when given the option to write about anything they wish—may want to pay close attention to what could be going on in their personal lives that might require additional support or intervention. Perhaps, as the opioid crisis has caused the mortality rate in some rural communities to increase dramatically in recent years (Hazlett, 2018; Macy, 2018; Rigg et al., 2018), children in these communities may find themselves with powerful feelings about death that they need help to process. Or, because so many students referenced violent video games in their stories (e.g., Minecraft, Fortnite), school leaders may consider hosting community discussions about the influence of such games on students' thinking.

Similarly, a great many students included incidences of bullying in their stories, confirming that bullying is often a source of great distress for children (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2018; Lines, 2008; Twemlow & Sacco, 2012). These young writers' teachers may consider using their stories as a platform for discussion, and they may want to recommend or share other literature featuring characters experiencing similar difficulties (e.g., *Free Verse* by Sarah Dooley [2016], whose protagonist, a resident of a West Virginia coal-mining town, learns to cope with her grief after the loss of multiple family members). Of course, troubling words found in children's writing should also prompt conversations with parents and school counselors to ensure students receive needed support.

Through this research, I learned that family is incredibly important to these students, and the writing task gave them a unique opportunity to explore familial relationships. Students expressed tension between family members even when there is abundant love, and they elucidated the "safe place" offered by pets, who were ubiquitously depicted positively across the data set. Students expressed the way children can feel powerless when adults make decisions with which they don't agree and when parents stand in the way of what they want to do. Some of the authors displayed incredible sensitivity and maturity in their writing about close relationships between characters, and this may have been relevatory to their teachers, who might not have observed these traits outside of the dialogic exchange that occurs through writing. In Chapter One, I described how I came to know my first-grade students more deeply through their writing, and it appears from this study that this would be all the more applicable to teachers of fourth graders, who are capable of communicating much more complex thoughts in their writing.

Place as a Sociocultural Context for Learning

Dyson (2008, p. 121) wrote that "as children participate in social activities involving text, they come to anticipate not only written language's functional possibilities, but also locally valued ways of doing, being, and relating to others." Because students were taught to understand place as a valuable part of their identities through the reading, writing, and class discussions embedded in the Promoting PLACE curriculum, and because they explored place-related identity concepts in their writing, my study supports Dyson's assertion by demonstrating the importance of connecting language arts instruction to rural students' sense of place.

The Promoting PLACE Fiction unit allowed students free choice of topic, and it is clear they wrote about experiences in which they took a personal interest such as sports, hunting, video games, and fashion. In doing so, like Dyson explained (1997), they appropriated semiotic resources from various domains. For example, several student authors appropriated symbols from *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 1997-2007) by casting characters from the series in their own stories, while several other students used their stories to expand the worlds they knew from playing Minecraft (Mojang Synergies, 2009) and Fortnite (Epic Games, 2017).

Since such a wide variety of topics were covered across the data, my study supports rural education research that cautions against making generalizations about rural students. Ruday and Azano (2019, p. 21), for example, wrote, "The most effective instruction that integrates students' out-of-school lives, home cultures, and individual identities does not assume that students have particular interests because they possess certain attributes or are from a particular location (Winn & Johnson, 2011), but rather gives students opportunities to explore aspects of their lives, interests, and cultures that are particularly meaningful to them" (p. 14). This is important because it disrupts preconceived notions about rural people collectively that could actually prevent the findings from studies such as this one from being useful to teachers of rural students. For

example, imagine a rural community whose primary organized recreation revolves around rodeo competitions. If teachers in the local schools assume a place-based educational approach means they should assign writing assignments about the rodeo, they would likely further alienate the few students in their class who are not interested in this topic. Instead, as this study demonstrates, rural students in any given locale have a wide variety of interests that need to be valued in responsive classrooms.

Further, it is important not to conceptualize rurality and place as completely intertwined. For example, Story #074 is about a young girl, Crissy, who discovers her family is moving from Sacramento to Los Angeles. Because the author chose to imagine her protagonist in two big cities across the country from where she lives, I concluded that her story did not reflect her rural identity, so I rated it as a *1* on my rurality scale. However, her choice to set her story in a place very different from her own did not mean her story did not reflect a *sense of place*. In fact, the whole story was about how alarming it was for Crissy to suddenly be told her family would be relocating and how powerless she felt when her parents shut down all conversation about the move before she had any time to process the news. In moving to Los Angeles, Crissy has to say goodbye to her friends and teachers—the community that makes up a "place" as much as the actual physical surroundings. Leaving her school for the last time, Crissy looks back sadly at the rock where she used to sit and eat yogurt with her friends, as if to acknowledge that this space she values no longer belongs to her. As the reader, I could feel the sense of loss Crissy experiences in that moment. I understand, too, why the author in a sense "pulled the plug" on this painful storyline by allowing Crissy to take a very important part of her community—her best friend—with her to her new place. As a sensitive, talented fourth-grade writer, perhaps putting her character through that much sorrow was too much for the author to bear, and she exercised

agency in executing a different outcome for Crissy. In any case, a continued look at how rural students represent the sociocultural nature of place in more nuanced ways in their narrative fiction writing may be warranted in future research.

Creative Writing as Sociocultural Practice

According to Dyson, "Composing is not only about producing a text, but also about composing a complex, responsive self in a world made with others" (2013, p. 178). Throughout this dissertation, I have shown how the student writers used the narrative fiction writing task to create versions of themselves—their "complex, responsive selves"—through their characters. For example, a major theme across the data was heroism, and it suggested a longing in children this age to be seen as brave, heroic, and on the side of good. And, the worlds students created in their stories were indeed "made with others" as Dyson signaled. In some instances, the "others" were sitting right beside them in class, as in the case of the two stories (#092, #093) involving young girls trapped in their barns during severe weather events; surely the classmates exchanged ideas while writing these very similar tales. In other cases, the "others" were authors of published stories that influenced the students' writing. For example, the way several students adapted *The Queen Bee* (Grimm & Grimm, 1886), a story included in the Promoting PLACE curriculum (Lesson 11), represented an ongoing conversation between the fairy tale's original authors, the various people who translated and retold the tale over time, the curriculum's authors, the teacher delivering the curriculum, and the student writers.

The type of creative writing described in this study, according to Dobson and Stephenson (2017, p. 162), "can be nurtured by a community that […balances] pedagogical 'structure' and 'freedom' (D. Davies et al., 2012)"—in this case, the "structure" of an assigned writing task with a rubric to follow, but also the "freedom" of being able to craft a creative story in whatever genre

students chose. This balance, then, "provide(s) textual space for writers to enact different identities" (Dobson & Stephenson, 2017, p. 162). In other words, providing space and time for students to create stories as they did during this project is valuable for their growth as literate individuals in the midst of the ongoing process of identity formation. It is valuable, too, for enhancing their connections to both the larger literate world and to the social world of their own classrooms, which are each situated within a particular local context.

Of the younger students she observed, Dyson wrote, "The children were not only socialized into official practices, but they also exercised agency; they used familiar frames of reference—familiar practices—to give these new school demands relevance and meaning in their ongoing lives" (2013, p. 164). This dissertation extends Dyson's findings to the context of place-based writing instruction with rural fourth graders: Students were socialized into official writing practices (addressing state standards for writing); they exercised agency (choosing what type of stories to write and crafting the stories' outcomes); and they used familiar frames of reference (connections to rurality and place) to give the school demands (the mastery of writing skills) relevance and meaning to their lives.

Understanding the Possibilities Through the Lens of Critical Pedagogy

"A socially conscious place-based critical pedagogy can originate from a place of hope, even in communities burdened by loss." –Azano & Biddle, 2019

In his introduction to Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Shaull writes that "Education […can become] 'the practice of freedom,' the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world." This investigation was grounded in the fundamental belief that providing meaningful educational experiences to all students is our societal responsibility. As such, I discuss in this section how this study related to Freire's critical pedagogy in that it used place-based, culturally

relevant teaching practices; it demonstrated how place-based instruction can be an avenue for equitable access to the writing curriculum; it set the stage for engaging students in critical conversations about place; it showed how students demonstrated agency in their writing; and it revealed potentially hidden talents that must be nurtured as a matter of social justice.

Place-Based, Culturally Relevant Teaching

In their article discussing an argument writing unit designed to motivate rural students, Ruday and Azano (2019) explained that place-based writing instruction is a culturally relevant teaching practice. "Place-based writing instruction," they wrote, "provides the *culturally* relevant work to become *locally* relevant, exploring the various cultures experienced in a student's family and community" (p. 2, emphasis in original). Culturally and linguistically responsive teaching and learning (Hollie, 2018) is a concept drawn from theories of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2000) which seeks to validate and affirm the experiences of people across cultures. In his book on the subject, Hollie (2018) suggested literacy educators make every effort to share literature that represents the "authentic cultural experiences" of various cultural groups in meaningful ways (p. 141).

The International Literacy Association (ILA) promotes the use of authentic literature by adopting standards requiring elementary teacher candidates to "provide differentiation and instructional materials . . . that capitalize on diversity" and "facilitate a learning environment in which differences and commonalities are valued (e.g., use literature that reflects the experiences of marginalized groups)" (ILA 2010, parentheses in original). The Promoting PLACE curriculum used culturally relevant, place-based literature to teach language arts concepts, and many of the student writers emulated the writing of the "mentor texts" chosen because of their relevance to rural students. For example, the author of Story #170, *The Mythical Forest,* wrote a

story in which the protagonist used survival skills very similar to the ones described in *My Side of the Mountain* (George, 1959) to escape a precarious situation encountered during a wilderness adventure. Because this study has shown that many students excelled in writing after being exposed to place-based literature, it provides support for "mentor texts" that are relevant to a particular rural culture to be used widely in rural schools.

Place-Based Instruction as an Avenue for Equitable Access to the Writing Curriculum

In Chapter Two, I wrote of my intention to identify instances where semiotic resources from students' rural culture seemed to "muscle into" their stories, following the example of Millard (2005). I found that at least 43% of the rural fourth-grade writers in this study reflected a sense of place with respect to their rural communities, which supported the findings of previous research illustrating the importance of place for increasing curricular relevance for rural students (e.g., Azano, 2011; Chisholm & Trent, 2013; Coleman, 2011; Comber et al., 2001; Donovan, 2016a, 2016b; Ruday & Azano, 2014, 2019). Curricular relevance, according to Keller (1983), is a "learner's perception that important personal needs are being met by the learning situation" (p. 406). In other words, place-based instruction helps students feel that what they are learning in the classroom is useful to them in their lives outside of school (Dewey, 1985/1916). Because so many students included reflections of place in their stories—with some stories (e.g., #077, #092, #181, #236) centering completely around activities common in students' particular rural communities—my study adds to the body of literature supporting the use of a place-based curriculum in the language arts to promote curricular relevance for rural students.

However, rural culture is not a monolith (Ruday & Azano, 2019), and the wide variety of stories written by students in the same general geographic region demonstrates the diversity within rural communities. For example, although no other students wrote stories with themes of

race, it was the primary focus of Story #234, showing it was of profound importance to this particular young author. At the same time, an unexpected finding from my study was the fact that almost every student author who mentioned eye color (an indirect indication of race) in their physical descriptions of characters noted that the characters had blue or green eyes. This is revealing because it suggests a preference for lighter eyes which, historically, has been a marker for discrimination against Jewish people and people of color (Sanderson, 2018). In her 1970 novel, *The Bluest Eye,* Toni Morrison described a young girl's longing for blue eyes, because even she, as a person of color, had internalized the societal messages ascribing more value to people with blue eyes, who are almost always white (Kiprop, 2019; Moyer, 2019). Perhaps ironically, then, the one story (#234) that focuses primarily on race is about a black girl, Mary O. Ward, who feels out of place for the very reason that she is the only person she knows with "dark" skin and blue eyes. Meeting other people who share these traits (presumably long-lost relatives) improves Mary's self-confidence, and she affirms her racial identity in the final lines by exclaiming, "I am proud to be different, I am proud to be here, I am proud to be African American!" In many rural communities, especially in the southeastern region of the United States where the participants lived, racial tensions certainly exist (Wuthnow, 2018), and this study suggests creative writing can be a vehicle for helping students explore how these tensions play out in their own lives. It also indicates a need for further research to examine the ways in which intermediate elementary students represent race in narrative fiction stories.

Recently, writer Jason Reynolds was appointed National Ambassador for Young People's Literature (Barron, 2020), and in an interview on CBS This Morning (CBS News, 2020), Reynolds shared his desire to highlight the experiences of people living in mostly-black rural communities, which he declared to be overlooked when the educational needs of rural people are

discussed. Reynolds's novel, *As Brave as You* (2017), a Coretta Scott King Book Award honoree, and *Gone Crazy in Alabama* by Rita Williams-Garcia (2015), a winner of that award (American Library Association, 2020), are two examples of high-quality place-based literature set in mostly-black rural communities that could be shared with rural students. Stories like these have the potential to dismantle stereotypes and to inspire rural students as writers in the same way that the literature shared during the Promoting PLACE Fiction unit seems to have inspired the students in my study.

Critical Conversations About Place

In addition to increasing student engagement in curricular activities, focusing on place may also help engage students in critical conversations about the needs of their local communities. For example, Azano (2009, p. 150) expressed a need for the rural high school students she studied to challenge gender expectations and to "think critically about the cultural biases they perpetuated." While the elementary students in my study might be a bit too young to fully understand certain challenges facing rural communities (e.g., gender biases, lack of job opportunities, drug abuse), they are nonetheless affected by them, and their concerns about these issues appeared in some of their stories (e.g., #005, #078, #094, #115). As a result, it seems appropriate to gently begin these types of critical conversations in the elementary language arts classroom, using literature and writing as a backdrop. Approaching language arts instruction from a critical pedagogy of place (Gruenewald, 2003) "could potentially allow students to view 'place'—its norms, limits, and possibilities—as a reciprocal and malleable concept that they can affect" (Azano, 2009, p. 152).

Agency and Empowerment

In Chapter Five, I described some of the many ways in which students exerted agency within their stories, perhaps vicariously exploring personal desires through writing. From her ethnographic research into younger children's writing practices, Dyson (1997) wrote that "Children's imaginative play is all about freedom from their status as powerless children. Tales about good guys and bad ones, rescuers and victims, boyfriends and girlfriends allow children to fashion worlds in which *they* make decisions about characters and plots, actors and actions" (p. 166). As the extensive descriptions in Chapter Four reveal, all of these topics (good versus evil, heroism, romance) were written about by children in this study, suggesting that fourth graders, too, use writing to imagine worlds in which they have more power. Students created worlds where bullies were conquered by various means (violence in some cases, compassion in others), parental restrictions were bypassed, romantic feelings were explored, and, in one story, a prized 12-point buck was shot and killed by a boy who had used his rifle just the day before to spare the life of a younger deer.

In Appendix K, I share the above-referenced story in its entirety because it was the only one to which I assigned top ratings for both holistic quality and rurality; accordingly, it has much potential for illuminating the possibilities that exist at the intersection of rurality and high ability in the language arts. With earnest, tender detail, the author describes a boy's nervousness and excitement surrounding his first big hunting trip with his dad and uncle. *My Lucky Day* is a story about the love between a father and son and the relationship between a boy and his community—but it is also a story about empowerment. In the moment when the boy encounters a fox about to attack a baby deer, he could have chosen to shoot the deer (after all, they were on a deer hunting trip) or to let nature take its course (presumably the fox would have hurt or killed the deer).

Instead, he chose to use the power afforded to him by the gun in his hand to shoot the fox and spare the baby deer. With such tenderness, the boy's father commends his son on his decision, remarking, "You have a good heart." The very next day, however, when the boy and his father spot a grown deer, a male, the dad empowers his son by handing over his own rifle. Steadying his aim, the boy takes a shot, and at first he is too "shy" to see if he was successful in conquering the powerful animal, "but when I looked, he was dead . . . and I was so happy." He was happy because he had achieved the ultimate goal of his first hunting trip, and after reaching this important milestone, his friends and family celebrated with him in a way so authentic to his rural culture—by cleaning, cooking, and eating the deer's meat together, then preserving and mounting its head to hang in the boy's room as a constant reminder of his having accomplished this important rite of passage.

Uncovering Hidden Talent as a Matter of Social Justice

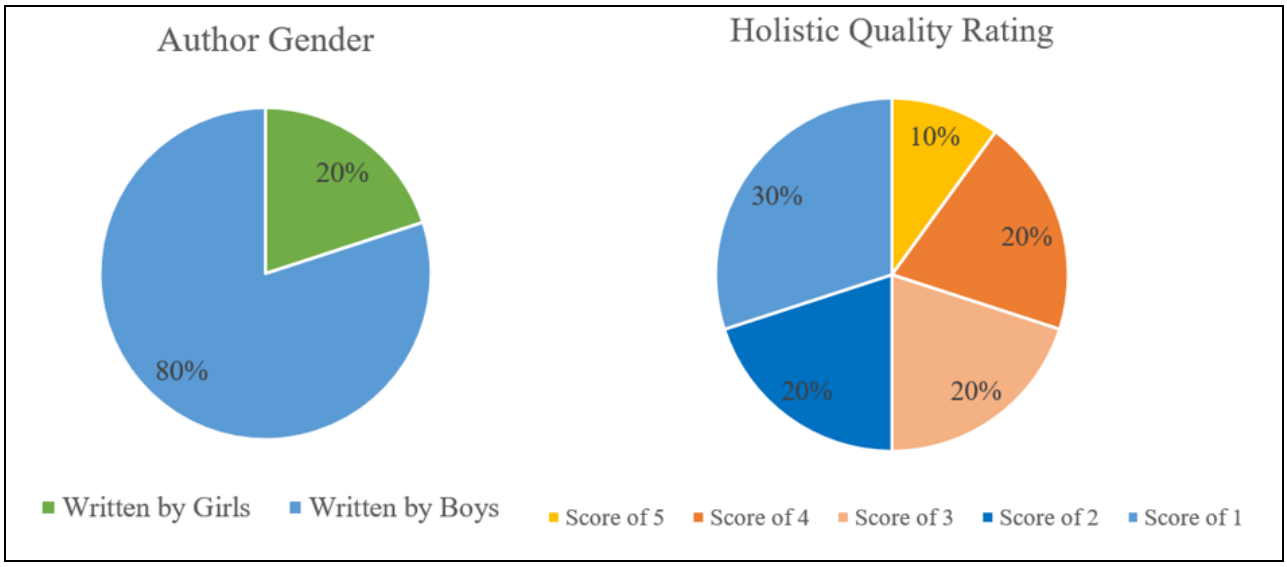
My Lucky Day seems to be a largely autobiographical story, as evidenced by the author having used the real name of the community in which he lived as its setting. If, like I suspect, the author of this story is a lot like his protagonist, whose world revolves around hunting and video games and spending time with his family, it is possible that his teacher may have never realized his amazing gifts as a writer had it not been for their joint experiences with this curriculum. In rural American culture, particularly in this region, activities which are seen as more masculine, like hunting, are sometimes viewed as more acceptable for boys over scholarly, literary pursuits (Azano, 2009). If this boy had not been provided the chance to write this story as the culminating project of a unit on fiction, his teacher may never have noticed his gift and passion for writing (the passion evidenced by the story's length at over 1,500 words!). It is my sincere hope that this story *was* acclaimed as exemplary and that this young author's teachers will continue to

encourage his writing, just as I hope that all the other extremely talented writers in this group will be similarly nurtured and supported, with their successes celebrated.

Furthermore, this study shows that the appeal of using a place-based language arts curriculum may be especially strong when it comes to boys, who generally fall behind girls in writing achievement (Berninger et al., 1996; McKeough & Genereux, 2003; Olinghouse, 2008). Among the 20 stories I rated as "very rural" and "most rural," 16 were written by boys, which indicates boys may be especially motivated to write about things of a rural nature (see Figure 7). This is a very important finding, because a great deal of research (e.g., Dobson, 2015b; Horst, 2016; Olthouse, 2012a, b) has decried the need to find effective ways to engage boys in the language arts. Moreover, among those same 20 stories, only half were rated as *3* or higher in terms of holistic quality (Figure 7).

Figure 7

Author Gender and Holistic Quality Rating of 20 Most Rural Stories



In other words, this study indicates that a place-based language arts curriculum may hold potential for engaging students who have not yet reached high levels of writing achievement. After all, providing points of access to the curriculum for all students in this way is a key aspect

of critical literacy, because a whole world of opportunity is opened when students learn to read and write well (Fox, 1988; Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Study Implications

Transfer of Learning

Writing is a skill students will need for life, but too often, attention to writing is minimized in the elementary curriculum (Coker et al., 2016; Cutler & Graham, 2008; Korth et al., 2016; McCarthey & Ro, 2011; National Commission on Writing, 2003; Simmerman et al., 2012). State standards, with their focus on research-based expository writing, sometimes sway school leaders to de-emphasize creative writing, but this study demonstrates that narrative fiction writing allows students to build writing skills they can later transfer to more "academic" writing pursuits (Ferlazzo, 2015). In that sense, this dissertation supports Dyson's call for a "reimagining" of elementary language arts curricula to make them "open to children's diverse communicative experiences and, at the same time, geared to expanding children's possibilities in ways that are compatible with human sociability and ethical responsibility (2013, p. 163)."

Achieving Curricular Goals

Following their vast meta-analysis of writing instruction practices across many decades, Graham et al. (2012) recommended that elementary teachers provide (a) explicit instruction in following the steps of the writing process (planning, drafting, revising); (b) clear procedures for developing self-regulation of writing; (c) more creativity and more structure in writing; (d) more practice with skills such as spelling, handwriting, and keyboarding; (e) implementation of comprehensive writing programs to assist teachers in making instructional choices; and (f) in general, an increased amount of time for students to write. All of these objectives can be accomplished by allowing time and space for place-based creative writing in the elementary

classroom. This does not mean just a bit of time here and there, but rather concentrated time where students can learn to fully develop a story in which they can take pride and ownership.

Motivation research shows that students need to find their subject of study interesting (Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Jones, 2018) for them to be willing to exert the needed effort to succeed, and this study shows that narrative fiction writing allows rural elementary students to pursue multiple areas of interest: far-off worlds, imaginary creatures, teenage life, and experiences and people that make them feel at home. If the eventual goal is to make students better expository writers, giving them the chance to create narrative fiction stories during the school day is a promising way to achieve it.

Extracurricular Opportunities for Gifted Writers

In her study of talented elementary writers, Olthouse (2014) found they were strongly influenced by their teachers, who offered useful conceptual and technical feedback on their writing and encouraged them to pursue opportunities to continue developing their writing talent. Students with immense talent like the authors of the "top ten" stories (Table 1, p. 68) must be made aware of and urged to apply for writing camps, online writing contests, and scholarships for gifted writers. As they move from grade to grade, their future teachers need to be made aware of their aptitude for writing so they can continue to cultivate and nurture it. In that way, students, having learned and internalized the symbols within the domain of creative writing, would be capable of contributing to the domain one day in the manner described by Csikszentmihalyi (1996) and discussed in Chapter One (pp. 10-11). These students must be encouraged to write and write and write, because the only way they will continue to improve as writers is to continue practicing their writing.

The Possibilities

A place-based language arts curriculum is not a magic bullet that can solve all educational challenges for rural students, but it does provide many possibilities to enhance and improve students' experiences with writing. This study revealed the possibility to nurture students' creativity and help them discover a love of literature that can guide them toward becoming stronger writers. It revealed the possibility for children to create meaningful narratives about the places in which they live and learn and dream. Even more, this study revealed the possibility for students to enjoy learning the skills they need to be best positioned for future opportunities, and it revealed the possibility of using place-based instructional practices to help students make meaning of decontextualized learning standards from which they may otherwise feel disconnected. This investigation revealed the possibility of discovering the incredible talent and acuity with language possessed by some rural fourth graders—talent that must be cultivated as a means of championing social justice for these children (Latz & Adams, 2011). Finally, this study revealed the possibility of getting to know students more fully, and to use what they communicate about their hopes and fears through their writing to guide them as they learn and grow.

Limitations and Implications for Future Iterations of the Study

Incorporating Classroom Observations

Because writing is a key tool for processing experience (Hillocks, 2007), "examining student writing gives us a window into how they are processing their experiences and communicating potential shifts in understanding of concepts and contexts" (Bass, 2019). In light of this principle, the research design for this study was intended to glean information solely from the writing itself using inductive analysis, and this was a meaningful exercise that adds a

nuanced, unique understanding of children's writing practices to the field. After all, writing exists separately from the writer, and an author's interpretation of his or her work is not necessarily more valid or correct than another reader's interpretation (Rosenblatt, 1978). At the same time, throughout my analysis of the data it was sometimes frustrating to be unable to check my assumptions about the writing with the authors themselves, and this could be considered a limitation of the study. For example, Story #069, *A Great Surprise,* is about a young girl who is sad to discover her older sister cannot make it home for a weekend visit from college, but she is happily surprised when the sister walks through the front door after all. I was curious as to whether this author really has a college-aged older sister, and whether her real family likes to pull playful pranks on one another as depicted in the story—essentially, how much of this fictional account was based in reality?

Because the students in this study were anonymous to me, discerning whether their stories expressed their identities relied mostly on inference, which is in contrast to the Dobson (2015a, b), Hultin and Westman (2018), and Millard (2005) studies in which the researchers analyzed the stories of students whom they had personally taught. For example, Dobson could ascertain that the boys in his study were asserting their "masculine hegemony" and rebellion against the limitations of the assignment. Similarly, Hultin and Westman (2018) could surmise that one student's inclusion of a moral lesson in her story was a manifestation of her desire to be viewed as a "good girl" by others, a hypothesis they could more-or-less confirm by observing her behavior in the classroom. Since my data were obtained secondarily, I was not able to compare the students' stories with their personalities or classroom behavior.

To further investigate the influence of the social world of the classroom on upper elementary writers in rural schools, the addition of an ethnographic component to a future

iteration of this study would be useful. In addition to examining the final written product of students in such a study, the researcher could be present while the students write to record observations of the social practices surrounding writing and to capture iterations of student writing as it is being drafted and revised. An interview component with both students and teachers could be added as a form of "member checking" (Maxwell, 2005) to avoid misinterpretations and to gain deeper insight into the writing.

Ensuring Completion of Unit

Another limitation of this study was the relative inconsistency with which the instruction was delivered across the many schools involved in the project. Though attempts were made in the larger Promoting PLACE study to ensure fidelity to the curriculum (e.g., small financial incentives were offered to teachers for completing fidelity logs), there were some obvious discrepancies among groups of students taught by various teachers. Most consequentially, several teachers did not reach the very last lessons in the curriculum, which would have provided time for students to revise, edit, and publish their work. Instead, many stories seemed to have been written in one sitting, and their quality appears to have suffered as a result. If all of the teachers had been able to teach all of the lessons, there would surely have been a greater proportion of stories in the high-quality "bin" (Maxwell, 2005); accordingly, my claim about students' writing having met and exceeded learning standards would have been stronger as it would have likely applied to a greater proportion of the stories. Future iterations of this study could occur in the fall semester instead of spring to avoid teachers feeling too rushed due to end-of-year testing pressures and deciding to collapse lessons.

Drawing from the General Student Population

A third limitation of this study is that student participants were identified as having high potential in the language arts. Although the criteria for identification were broader than those typically used to identify gifted students (Callahan et al., 2017), it is still likely that results of this study disproportionately represented higher-achieving students. Since literature suggests place-based education "may be most helpful for students who feel 'disconnected' from school or perceive school as being irrelevant," (Azano, 2009, p. 155), future iterations of this study may consider drawing participants from a more academically diverse pool of students, thus increasing the chances to include students who, perhaps due to chronic underperformance, feel disconnected from school.

Implications for Further Research

The MUSIC® Model of Motivation

In their study of high-ability writers, Garrett and Moltzen (2011) wrote that "effective teachers are those with an awareness of the conditions motivating young writers to write with ease." Combining decades of influential research in educational psychology, Jones (2018) designed the MUSIC model to help teachers understand the five key principles that must be in place for students to feel motivated in a given learning situation: eMpowerment, Usefulness, Success, Interest, and Caring. According to Jones (2018),

> Instructors need to ensure that students feel *empowered* by having the ability to make decisions about some aspects of their learning; understand why what they are learning is *useful* for their short- or long-term goals; believe they can *succeed* if they put forth the effort required; are *interested* in the content and instructional activities; and believe that

> others in the learning environment . . . *care* about their learning and about them as a person. (p. 9, emphasis in original)

Jones designed the MUSIC® Model of Academic Motivation Inventory (Jones, 2015) to quantitatively assess students' motivation-related perceptions by asking Likert-type questions about their perceptions when taught by a particular instructor with the goal of identifying areas of strength and needed improvement with regard to the instructor's ability to motivate students in that course. Because students' interactions with the Fiction unit of the Promoting PLACE curriculum (Azano et al., 2017a) seems to have motivated students to write, the MUSIC Inventory may be a fitting probe for future iterations of this work. Researchers could evaluate students' motivation for writing activities using the MUSIC Inventory both before and after being taught using the Fiction unit to determine whether, and in which areas, students' motivation-related perceptions change or stay the same across the unit.

Place-Based Writing in Other Places

This study examined the narrative fiction stories written by rural students who had been taught using a place-based language arts curriculum, and many students reflected a sense of place in their writing by including depictions of rural settings and communities similar to their own. However, place is not a construct that only affects people in rural areas (Comber et al., 2001; Esposito, 2012), so future research could examine the ways urban or suburban students would reflect place in their stories when taught in the same way. A comparison could be drawn as to whether the use of a place-based curriculum—perhaps adapted to include literature more reflective of the target population's place—would have the same positive influence on urban and suburban students' motivation to write as it appeared to have for the rural students in this study.

Evaluating the Specific Impact of Place-Based Curriculum Adaptations on Writing

Finally, this study examined the work of rural students who were taught using the Fiction unit of the Promoting PLACE curriculum (Azano et al., 2017a), which was adapted from the existing CLEAR curriculum for gifted students (Azano et al., 2017b; Callahan et al., 2017) to include a greater emphasis on place. Future research could compare the stories written by rural students taught using each curriculum to better understand the nuances of how the place-based focus of the Promoting PLACE curriculum influenced students' stories (i.e., would the rural students using the Promoting PLACE curriculum include more or richer references to place than those using the CLEAR curriculum?). Doing so could provide insight into the best ways to leverage place-based instruction (e.g., which published works shared in the curriculum seemed to most captivate students' attention?) to engage rural students in the language arts.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shared the possibilities for language arts instruction that were revealed during this study of narrative fiction stories written by rural fourth-grade students taught using the Fiction unit of a place-based curriculum using Vygotsky's theory of creativity (1971), his sociocultural theory (1978), and Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy as the theoretical framework. Namely, this study highlighted ways that teachers can use such an instructional approach to leverage curriculum connections to place to enhance student engagement, guiding children toward crafting meaningful narratives that help them make sense of the world around them. In so doing, teachers can discover students' hidden talents and build upon their strengths, and they can gain insight into the stressors children face so they can offer support.

Though creative writing is not a skill tested by high-stakes assessments given at the end of the school year, students can learn the skills that *are* tested (e.g., using subject-verb

agreement, noun-pronoun agreement, correct spelling; VDOE, 2017; see Appendix J) by practicing writing creatively, which, as shown by this study, can be highly appealing to high-ability fourth-grade students, allowing them to be producers—not just consumers—of knowledge (Smith, 2002). Failure to learn these skills limits students' possibilities for future life and work, which is particularly problematic in rural areas where employment opportunities are constrained. On the other hand, literacy is emancipatory (Freire & Macedo, 1987), and learning to write well will position students to do whatever they want to do in life. A place-based curriculum like the one used in this study has the potential to motivate students to write, and in doing so they will continue to internalize those crucial literacy skills.

Moreover, aesthetics and the arts are valued as part of what makes us human (Vygotsky, 1971). Culture and tradition are grounded in stories told across generations (Heath, 1983). Stories help us understand ourselves and the world around us, and they help us come to understand those from different places and with different backgrounds (Bishop, 1990). Through narrative fiction writing, students can explore their individual identities and connect socially with teachers, classmates, and anyone who may read their words. Narrative writing as a form of self-expression, creativity, and exploration is a valuable pursuit, and time and instruction should be provided to enable elementary students to participate.

In recent years, writing has been pushed out of the curriculum, and this study has strengthened my belief that it should be brought back into the very center of literacy learning. Narrative fiction writing, especially, deserves a prominent place in the elementary literacy curriculum, and this study has shown that providing a place-based foundation for skill development through this type of creative writing is highly beneficial for rural students.

This work has further strengthened my position that writing matters. Creativity matters. I hope this scholarship will encourage literacy educators to continue empowering rural elementary students by offering regular opportunities for them to practice self-expression through creative writing. I close with a reminder from Mem Fox (1988), who has enchanted readers with her own creative works: “Those of us who write well have the most power . . . and the granting of this power to children is politically and socially essential” (p. 122). This is the possibility: To teach writing in ways that have potential to reach far beyond the classroom, and to offer students the time, space, and support needed to explore their own imaginations within meaningful writing tasks grounded in a developing sense of place.

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Appendix A

List of Texts Used in Promoting PLACE Fiction Unit

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George, J. C. (1959). *My side of the mountain.* Puffin Books.

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Packard, E. (1985). *Return to the cave of time.* Bantam.

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Appendix B

Sample Lesson Plan from Promoting PLACE Fiction Unit

Writing Workshop #8: Prompt Bank

Teacher instructions: Select a prompt for each student based on any weaknesses noted in students' writing during Formative Assessment 3. If no weaknesses are noted, have the student select their own preferred prompt based on what they perceive is an area to work on developing.

Characterization

- Describe an action so it reveals something significant about the character who does it (500 word max)
- Interior monologues of five different characters with different feelings, who are all at recess (100 words each)
    - Sadness
    - Anger
    - Joy
    - Jealousy
    - Boredom

Conflict

- Describe one conflict in three different ways (100 words each)
    - Wonderful
    - Sad
    - Scary

Conflict/Dialogue

- Write a dialogue where two people argue about something unimportant, but the argument reveals an important conflict between the two.

Dialogue

- Write a dialogue between two characters in which one character says something other than what they are thinking. Use actions or gestures to reveal this character's actual meaning. (1 page max)

Imagery

- Make an extraordinary event sound ordinary (500 word max)
- Describe two people eating a meal without dialogue (500 word max)
- Describe an event witnessed by an unreliable narrator, which indirectly conveys what is actually happening (500 word max)
- Using only sensory details, describe a person so it is clear the narrator has a negative attitude towards the person
- Using only sensory details, describe a person so a good feeling towards the person is evident

Point of View

- Describe a character (observed) from the point of view of another character (observer), but the description should reveal more about the observer than the observed—this should be in first person
- Describe a character (observed) from the point of view of another character (observer), but the description should reveal more about the observer than the observed—this should be in third person

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Appendix C

Fiction Unit Final Story Assignment

You have been practicing, brainstorming, and plotting…now it is time to finish the journey by publishing your work through our class publication company[1]. You will be published once you submit your work to the editor (who you may know as your teacher!).

As you have traveled down this road, you have looked at:

- ☐ Imagery
- ☐ Setting
- ☐ Characters
- ☐ Characterization
- ☐ Dialogue
- ☐ Point of view
- ☐ Conflict
- ☐ Plot
- ☐ Publication details

To write your final story, you are going to put all these elements together into one coherent narrative. To create that narrative, you should write, edit, and revise until you are confident that every element meets the publication requirements on the **Your Editor Says…** rubric.

The editing process starts with writing the first draft. Don't worry too much about what it looks like—as the famous author William Faulkner said, "Get it down. Take chances. It may be bad, but it's the only way you can do anything really good."

Then you will complete a self-edit, and make changes based on your **Self-Edit Worksheet.**

After these changes, you will be assigned a peer editor to assist you, and then make changes based on the **Peer Edit Worksheet** that he or she completes.

Finally, you will look over the **Your Editor Says…** rubric one last time, and make your final submission to your editor, who will help you prepare your manuscript for publication.

So go forth and write something that is important to you! As Virginia Woolf says, "So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters."

Appendix D

Form for Recording Basic Story Information and Holistic Rating

- -

Student Identification Code:

1	2	3
Not among the top 100 pieces	Shows some potential for being among the top 100 pieces	Definitely among the top 100 pieces

Title:	
Genre:	
Plot:	
Characters:	
Setting:	

Indication of place?

Other notable elements?

Appendix E

List of Stories

Code	Title	Genre	AG	QR	RR	WC
001	The Tale of Explorer Ducky	adventure	F	1	1	337
002	Kit the Jack Russell	adventure	M	1	4	247
003	Salem	fairy tale	M	1	3	264
004	Alexander's Diary	realistic fiction	U	2	1	361
005	Hillbilly Joe	RF (with m/s elements)	M	2	6	351
006	Allison & Elly	RF (animal)	F	3	3	367
007	Pearl Harbor	historical fiction	M	3	2	534
008	Bob the Dog	RF (animal)	F	2	1	278
009	A Dog's Life	RF (animal)	F	2	3	529
010	Haunted School	ghost story	F	2	3	682
011	The Titanic	historical fiction	U	3	3	454
012	Survivor	adventure	U	3	1	756
013	Bone Breaker	fairy tale	M	3	3	455
014	High School Magic	RF (with m/s elements)	F	5	2	963
015	The Monster Attack	fantasy	M	4	1	1246
016	The Attack of Olympus	fantasy	M	2	1	1283
017	Ice Cream Forever	realistic fiction	F	1	2	324
018	Lost in the Woods	adventure	F	1	4	434
019	The Lucky Rock	RF (with m/s elements)	U	1	4	296
020	Mr. Crazy	fantasy	M	1	1	350
021	The City!	superhero	F	2	1	485
022	The Invasion	science fiction	M	1	1	499
023	The Great Phoenix	adventure	M	1	3	513
024	The Minecraft War	video game	F	2	1	428
025	The Dinosaur Battle	science fiction	M	2	1	273
026	The Sinkhole Man	realistic fiction	M	2	2	205
027	League of Legends	superhero	M	3	4	226
028	Sharknado	horror	F	2	1	282
029	The Sad Moment	horror	M	1	1	189
030	The Robber	adventure	M	1	1	190
031	The Night is Against You	ghost story	F	3	5	438
032	Beating the Bullies	horror	F	3	3	358
033	The Robotic Battle	science fiction	F	1	2	284
034	Monster?	science fiction	F	2	2	730
035	The Singing War	RF (animal)	U	2	2	473
036	A Family Battle	fairy tale	U	1	2	365
037	The Castles	fantasy	M	1	2	208
038	The Vengeful Twins	science fiction	F	5	3	1249
039	The Ruby of Narzia	fantasy	M	2	3	663
040	Eyes on YOU	horror	M	1	2	242

Code	Title	Genre	AG	QR	RR	WC
041	The Maps	science fiction	M	2	3	879
042	The Getaway	horror	F	2	4	589
043	Bob v. Kevin	adventure	M	2	1	417
044	The Three Keys	adventure	F	1	1	518
045	God Takes Over	science fiction	M	1	1	343
046	The Hunting Story	realistic fiction	M	1	6	469
047	Toolup Blue	realistic fiction	F	2	2	198
048	The Adventures of Unicorpia, Book One	fantasy	F	4	2	1187
050	The Revenge of Captain PSL	fantasy	F	2	1	589
051	Bad Luck	realistic fiction	F	2	2	599
053	The Huge Rainstorm	realistic fiction	F	2	2	256
054	Realm of the Magi: The Fiery Fight	video game	M	2	1	1078
055	The Mystery Tree House	mystery	M	2	4	1414
056	*Ghost Sighting	mystery	M	1	3	290
057	Pets Fight for Earth	science fiction	F	1	1	227
058	Shark: A Scary Story	mystery	M	1	3	431
059	The Adventure of Stacy and Lacy	realistic fiction	F	3	3	566
060	Lost Land	science fiction	M	2	1	393
061	The Pharaoh's Enemy	fantasy	M	2	1	281
062	The Path to Freedom	historical fiction	M	4	1	945
063	Lily, Lucy, and the Prince	fairy tale	F	4	3	459
064	*Resilient Sister	realistic fiction	F	3	3	466
065	The Opposites	realistic fiction	F	1	2	251
066	The Mystical Forest	fantasy	F	5	2	1706
067	*Cat in the Dryer	realistic fiction	F	2	2	176
068	Disaster	science fiction	M	2	3	393
069	A Great Surprise!	realistic fiction	F	3	2	565
070	Surprise	realistic fiction	F	2	2	266
071	Shark Bite	realistic fiction	F	2	2	711
072	*Cruise Ship Disaster	science fiction	M	3	6	1800
073	Unigirls	fantasy	F	2	2	779
074	*Moving to LA	realistic fiction	F	4	1	2138
075	*Sunkitty & Moonpuppy	fantasy	F	2	3	798
076	*Amazon Treasure Hunt	adventure	M	2	1	1582
077	My Lucky Day	realistic fiction	M	5	6	1536
078	One Birthday	realistic fiction	F	2	2	236
079	Friends	realistic fiction	F	2	2	217
080	School!!!!!!!	realistic fiction	M	1	2	222
081	The Witch Adventure	RF (with m/s elements)	F	3	2	930
082	Grimm's Version Brave Girls	fairy tale	F	2	4	229
083	Aliens	science fiction	M	3	1	913
084	The King and Queen Bee	fairy tale	F	1	3	201
085	[Name Withheld] vs. Junior	realistic fiction	M	1	2	182

Code	Title	Genre	AG	QR	RR	WC
086	A Robot Girl's Life	science fiction	M	1	2	111
087	The Nervous Little Boy	realistic fiction	F	1	2	302
088	Cardinal's Journey	RF (animals)	M	2	5	161
089	The Big Surprise	realistic fiction	F	1	4	174
090	The Rematch	realistic fiction	M	1	5	160
091	Riley Runs Away	realistic fiction	F	1	2	132
092	The Blizzard	realistic fiction	F	3	2	279
093	*Farm Rainstorm	realistic fiction	F	2	5	162
094	The Bully	realistic fiction	F	2	2	146
095	The Raiders Fall	science fiction	M	1	3	155
096	The Day Max Became a Hero	science fiction	M	2	3	368
097	Super Sisters	superhero	F	2	3	602
098	Island	adventure	F	5	1	2143
099	*Crazy Dream	adventure	M	1	2	236
100	Mean Girls: Neon Edition	realistic fiction	F	2	1	886
101	The War of the Dragons	fantasy	F	1	1	359
102	2019	RF (with m/s elements)	F	1	2	490
103	An Evil Morning	horror	M	1	3	404
104	Bootsy Adventures, Book 1: Visions	adventure	F	5	4	2469
105	Mickey Mouse	video game	M	1	2	260
106	*Haunted School	ghost story	M	3	3	1151
107	Magic Is Real	fantasy	F	4	3	1461
108	*Harry Potter Game	video game	F	1	2	223
109	*Kate, Kane, & Lora	fantasy	F	1	3	351
110	Harry Potter and the Crimson Black	fantasy	M	1	2	177
111	Minecraft Madness	video game	F	3	2	799
112	*Haunted Museum	adventure	M	2	2	503
113	*Oz and Voldemort Mashup	fantasy	M	1	1	366
114	Lost in a Random World	adventure	M	2	3	515
115	The Night Before Christmas Eve	realistic fiction	F	1	2	270
116	Super Hero!!!	superhero	F	2	1	371
117	The Haunted House	horror	M	2	2	368
118	*The Emperor and Paris	adventure	F	1	1	320
119	I Hate Those Twins	realistic fiction	F	1	2	245
120	The Mysterious Day	mystery	F	1	1	402
121	The Life of a Superhero	superhero	F	1	1	218
122	A Fun Day	fairy tale	F	2	2	423
123	The Missing Diamond	mystery	M	2	3	397
124	*Aliens and Cyborgs	science fiction	M	1	1	242
125	The Gray Shaggy Dog	realistic fiction	F	3	2	469
126	The Experiment	realistic fiction	F	4	2	1396
127	*Soccer World Champions	realistic fiction	M	1	2	545
128	*Aubrey & Audrey	realistic fiction	F	3	4	2160

Code	Title	Genre	AG	QR	RR	WC
129	The School Lockdown	horror	F	3	3	1190
130	The Dragon's Breath	fantasy	M	1	3	626
131	*Knight School	fairy tale	M	2	2	1413
132	Off to Australia	adventure	F	2	2	1129
133	The Broken Friendship Is Saved	realistic fiction	F	3	2	523
134	A Break-Up in the Woods	historical fiction	F	2	4	382
135	Luke and His Team, Volume I	mystery	M	1	1	271
136	The Haunted House	mystery	M	1	3	199
137	The Evil Daycare	fairy tale	F	1	2	302
138	A New Life	realistic fiction	M	2	3	291
139	The Potion	adventure	U	2	3	376
140	How the War Began	Fantasy	F	1	2	138
141	The Ninjas of China	adventure	M	1	2	305
142	How the Journey Began	Fantasy	F	1	2	222
143	Crazy Vacation	RF (with m/s elements)	F	2	2	311
144	*Dragonwings	Fantasy	F	4	2	759
145	Mystic Plains	Fantasy	F	1	2	255
148	What Can Happen in a Day	Horror	U	1	1	262
149	*Animals vs. Robots	superhero	F	2	1	291
150	The Great Adventure	adventure	M	2	4	226
151	*BFF Moves to China	realistic fiction	F	2	2	385
152	The Adventure	fantasy	F	1	4	295
153	Beach Disaster	RF (with m/s elements)	F	1	2	174
154	The Story	RF (with m/s elements)	F	1	2	207
155	*Creepy House	horror	M	1	2	197
156	*Portal to Unicorn World	fantasy	F	1	4	312*
157	*Lost City of the Dead	adventure	U	2	3	418
158	What Really Happened in History	historical fiction	M	1	1	114
159	Mysteriously Adopted	mystery	F	1	2	123
160	The Mystery Day	realistic fiction	F	2	2	334
161	Aliens	science fiction	M	1	1	191
162	The Accident	realistic fiction	M	3	2	298
163	*Kiloskoe the Villain	fantasy	F	2	4	277
164	Henery and the . . .	realistic fiction	F	1	2	174
165	The Drawing	fantasy	M	1	2	171
166	The Adventures of the Professor Club	superhero	M	1	1	166
167	*Dumbledork vs. Grumpy Pants	science fiction	M	1	1	187
168	The Midnight Crisis	mystery	M	1	4	165
169	The Wonder of the Monster Jam	realistic fiction	M	1	3	280
170	The Mythical Forest	realistic fiction	M	1	6	265
171	An Adventure	adventure	F	1	4	193
172	The Boy and the Princess	fairy tale	U	1	2	116
173	The Girl in Space	realistic fiction	F	3	2	177

Code	Title	Genre	AG	QR	RR	WC
174	The Nightmare of the Two Fires	realistic fiction	M	1	2	156
175	The Little Sea Turtle	adventure	F	1	2	173
176	The House	realistic fiction	M	1	2	57
177	The Attack of the Fruits	RF (with m/s elements)	F	1	2	261
178	My Friend Katie and Mean John	realistic fiction	F	2	2	190
179	The Last Notebook	mystery	M	1	3	241
180	Baycon Wants to Play	RF (animals)	F	3	4	417
181	Airsoft War	realistic fiction	M	1	4	128
182	The Princess That Never Listened	fairy tale	F	3	2	424
183	The Meaning of the Necklace	fairy tale	F	5	4	614
184	The Vines Come Alive	RF (with m/s elements)	M	4	6	436
185	Hill Valley Kingdom	fairy tale	M	5	4	920
186	The Elegant Girl	fairy tale	F	3	2	718
187	Piggy People	fairy tale	M	2	3	392
188	A Forever Home	realistic fiction	F	3	3	939
189	The Pizza War	RF (with m/s elements)	M	2	3	283
190	The Car Crash	RF (with m/s elements)	M	1	4	108
191	A Football Miracle	realistic fiction	M	1	3	159
192	Game Boy	video game	M	1	2	109
193	The Big Meeting	realistic fiction	F	1	4	209
194	Emma and Her Dog	realistic fiction	F	1	3	375
195	The Missing Makeup	mystery	F	1	4	147
196	Dip-n-Dots Dream	realistic fiction	M	3	5	419
197	The Ol' Cracken	adventure	M	4	5	835
198	Cayley's Crazy Catastrophe	RF (with m/s elements)	F	5	2	1401
199	The Adventures of Bobby the Pencil	adventure	M	2	1	581
200	The Trouble Maker	realistic fiction	F	5	5	1432
201	The Bridge	RF (with m/s elements)	M	4	6	611
202	The Pond	fantasy	F	4	4	695
203	A Forever Home	realistic fiction	F	3	2	624
204	Family Always Comes First	fantasy	F	3	3	725
205	The Running Boy	realistic fiction	M	3	2	546
206	*The Raccoon Thief	realistic fiction	M	1	6	176
207	The Knife's Edge	historical fiction	M	1	2	316
208	The Attack from the Sky	historical fiction	M	1	4	218
209	The Flying Zebras	fantasy	F	1	2	261
210	No More Bullying!	realistic fiction	F	1	2	175
211	The Incredible Rescue of Dizel	RF (animal)	M	1	5	229
212	Lost in the Woods	realistic fiction	F	1	4	336
213	*Camping Trip	realistic fiction	M	1	4	276
214	Controlling Weather	science fiction	M	1	2	236
215	Summer Vacation	realistic fiction	F	1	2	449
216	Zombie Attack	horror	M	1	4	477

Code	Title	Genre	AG	QR	RR	WC
217	The Comp of Lexington	realistic fiction	F	1	2	763
218	*Fishing with Mom	realistic fiction	U	1	4	187
219	*Monkey Attack	realistic fiction	F	1	2	95
220	The Big Race	realistic fiction	M	1	2	146
221	*Wagon Breakdown	historical fiction	U	1	4	173
222	Zombies in Space	science fiction	U	1	1	144
223	Friends	RF (animal)	F	2	4	219
224	Mr. and Mrs. Bunny's Life with Young	RF (animal)	F	2	4	238
225	*Magicians	realistic fiction	M	2	4	393
226	*Planet Theasauras Rex	science fiction	M	1	4	185
227	The Cat Calypso	realistic fiction	M	1	5	302
228	*Hawaiian sisters	realistic fiction	F	1	2	159
229	*Sea the Mermaid Human	fantasy	F	2	2	588
230	*Josh and His Two Cats	realistic fiction	M	1	2	202
231	*The Big Basketball Game	realistic fiction	M	1	2	291
232	Captain Mousetown	RF (animals)	F	1	2	402
233	*Mermicorn	fantasy	F	1	4	280
234	*Blue-eyed Girl	realistic fiction	F	2	3	379
235	P. Kipper & P. Bernice in the World of Dogs	fairy tale	M	1	4	252
236	Dew on the Horizon	realistic fiction	M	4	6	247
237	The Cursed Rock Island	fantasy	M	2	3	414
238	The Detective	RF (animals)	M	2	5	449
239	The Weird Cheeseburger	RF (with m/s elements)	F	2	2	243
240	The Turn on the Bullies	realistic fiction	U	2	2	401
241	*Pumpkin Perspective	fantasy	U	1	3	119

* Originally untitled stories to which I assigned titles.

Note: Codes #049, #052, #146, and #147 were assigned to four pieces which were eliminated from the data set due to illegibility or format.

AG = Author Gender (Female, Male, or Unknown); QR = Holistic Quality Rating (1-5); RR = Rurality Rating; WC = Word Count

Appendix F

Summaries of the Ten Highest Rated Stories (Holistic Quality)

***Bootsy Adventures, Book One: Visions* (#104)**

The story of Bootsy, a "teenage" cat, takes place across multiple scenes. First, Bootsy has a disturbing dream involving dogs, which her mom explains might be a vision. When she has the same dream a second time, her mother takes her to see an old wise cat, Shredder, who might be able to help them interpret it. At his barn, they meet the dog from her vision, Loso, but just as Bootsy starts explaining the dream to Shredder, a rat runs in to tell the group about a cat in trouble and Shredder leaves to help. Later, Shredder, who is being chased by dogs, rushes back into the barn. Loso and Bootsy follow them and see the dogs attacking Shredder. Though Loso is too afraid, Bootsy and her mother, along with many more dogs, cats, and rats, enter the fight, and sadly, Shredder is killed. Bootsy is very upset, and her mom tries to comfort her by saying, "Everyone has to go at one point in life. We'll be fine." The story ends with Bootsy repeating, *"We'll* be fine," which implies her consternation at the unfairness of Shredder's sacrificial death.

***Cayley's Crazy Catastrophe* (#198)**

Cayley, a smart girl who is bullied, accidentally invents a potion that makes a person's dreams come true—but only for eight hours. She brings the potion to school to sell, and people are suddenly nice to her. But, when mean Carley knocks the potion out of Cayley's hand, "dreams [start] coming true all over the place," and Cayley's supply is depleted. The next day, Cayley wants to make more potion for the group of kids clamoring after it, but her mom helps her realize that she doesn't need to "buy" friendships with magic potion.

***High School Magic* (#014)**

Teenagers Victoria, Samantha, and Tamara are best friends. Victoria has a crush on Ein, who is half-werewolf. At school, the group encounters bullies—Melisa and Ellie—who don't want to see Victoria and Ein become a couple. They insult Victoria by calling her a human, but, unbeknownst to her, it turns out Victoria is actually a werewolf, too. The three friends heroically fight and make the evil imposters Melisa and Ellie vanish. Ein and Victoria end up together, and rather than asking Victoria to be his girlfriend, Ein asks, "Will you be the alpha female?"

***Hill Valley Kingdom* (#185)**

Brandon, a dedicated servant to the king, has a vision that Wesley, an evil warlock, will attempt to take over the kingdom of Hill Valley. He tries to warn the king of the danger, but it is too late—Wesley had kidnapped the king at the same time Brandon had the vision and was now using the king's magic crown for evil. Brandon rushes to try to save the king, and after getting through several dangerous obstacles (confrontations with wolves, snakes, bees, and dragons) he finally reaches the dungeon where the king is imprisoned. Facing the warlock, Brandon shoots an arrow into the warlock's amulet, causing him to drop the crown, which Brandon swiftly picks up. After Brandon frees the king and imprisons the warlock, peace is restored to Hill Valley and

Brandon is knighted as Special Protector of the King, just like his father had been before his untimely death.

***Island* (#098)**

Seven strangers are stranded on an island following a plane crash, and this story describes their adventures in exploring the island, finding food, and interacting with one another. The group includes Bexly, a sarcastic teenager; twin girls Marie and Marine; the twins' mother, Mrs. Clocksworth, who tries to keep everyone organized; Cylus, a hair-obsessed shoe model; Alex, a messy, carefree young man; and James, an older man who gets frustrated with the group and wanders off on his own. On the fifth day, James returns with a boat just in time to save everyone from an erupting volcano. After a few days at sea, the group makes it to an island populated with English speakers and cell service, and they are reunited with their families.

***The Meaning of the Necklace* (#183)**

A prophecy states that a princess who finds the key to a certain safe will discover a magical necklace with the power to transform her into the wisest and fairest queen in the land. Two princesses, sisters whose parents have passed away, search far and wide for the key, and they are gone for so long that their kingdom forgets them. Instead of living as royalty, the sisters take jobs in the fields and build a happy life with no money or power. One day, the younger sister, Emma, finds an old key and ponders what might have been, but Tanasia, the elder and wiser sister, muses that they are perfectly content with their simple life and she would not want to change a thing. Still, Tanasia puts the key into the lock of a safe they have had with them all along, and the prophecy is instantly fulfilled. "The only thing which remained as it had been was the cabin door, reminding everyone of how Tanasia the Wonderful—which was what they called their wise queen—had found that in a simple, humble life lay the doorway to happiness, not only for herself, but for all the inhabitants of the land."

***My Lucky Day* (#077)**

Early one morning, a father wakes up his son for his first big hunting trip. They pick up the boy's uncle, then get situated in the field, looking for deer. At one point, the boy sees a fox about to attack a baby deer, and he shoots the fox to save it. His dad says, "You have a good heart." During the trip, the dad and uncle each kill a buck, but the boy is not successful. They return home to find friends and family who are there to celebrate the boy's first hunting weekend, which continues the following morning. This time, the boy is elated when he shoots and kills his first buck. Afterwards, the whole family and all his friends help clean it, eat it, and celebrate the boy's completion of this rite of passage.

***The Mystical Forest* (#066)**

Julie meets a "little girl" (seemingly a fairy) in the woods near her home. The girl insists she come back at midnight, but when Julie asks her stepmother for permission, she refuses. Together, Julie and her stepmother consult a book called *The Mystical Forest* for information about events such as this one and argue about whether the book does or does not affirm Julie's desire to meet the fairy. Despite the lack of permission, Julie goes anyway, and she and the fairy are transported

to a magical world. There, they are tasked with finding a special amulet, which will change the statue of Mother Nature back into a real-life person. After accomplishing their task successfully, Julie returns home to find that no time has passed; her stepmother tucks her in for the night as if nothing has happened.

***The Trouble Maker* (#200)**

After repeatedly arguing with her mother about getting out of bed, Tiana shows up late for school and is very grouchy and disheveled. She talks back to a teacher, pushes a classmate's books off her desk, and is sent to the principal's office. Because this kind of behavior has been going on for a long time, Tiana's mother decides to send her to a boot camp for troubled youth. Despite a last-ditch plea for reconsideration, Tiana arrives at boot camp to find it very hard; the leader of her group is a former soldier who won't tolerate Tiana's noncompliance. Luckily, Tiana's new roommates are welcoming and supportive, and as a result, Tiana learns to change her ways. "That day I realized all I really needed was friendship, and I had finally found it."

***The Vengeful Twins* (#038)**

Jane is an extremely evil person who tortures others and drinks their blood to stay alive. Her twin brother, Jamie, is kind. A prophecy exists where Jamie must stay alive until Jane changes her ways, but after 1,264 years, Jane continues to try to subvert the prophecy and kill her brother. A brief flashback reveals that she once had affection for him and that her evilness is driven by insecurity. At the end of the story, Jane throws Jamie into a dungeon, where he pleads with her to "turn away, turn away" from her evil ways, but the reader is left not knowing whether his pleas were effective or whether he will have to continue to bear the burden of the prophecy.

Appendix G

Promoting PLACE Fiction Scoring Rubric

Your Editor Says...

Element	You need to go back to the drawing board	You need multiple revisions	You need one more revision	Your work is publishable!
Alignment **NOTE: "**story elements" refers to all the elements listed below!	None of the story elements are consistent or make sense.	Some of the story elements are consistent and make sense.	Most of the story elements are consistent and make sense.	All the story elements are consistent and make sense.
Characters*	There are no characters developed enough to be a protagonist/antagonist/ stock character.	The protagonist/ antagonist are underdeveloped. The stock character serves no purpose.	The protagonist/ antagonist are identifiable. The stock character has a debatable purpose.	The protagonist/ antagonist are well developed. The stock character serves a clear purpose.
Characterization	Either direct or indirect characterization is missing.	There is an uneven balance between direct and indirect characterization that is distracting to the reader.	The direct and/or indirect characterization are developed but inconsistent.	Both direct and indirect characterization are consistent and well developed.
Conflict	There is no major conflict.	The major conflict is unclear.	The major conflict is identifiable.	The major conflict is clearly identifiable and well-developed.
Dialogue	There is no dialogue, even when it would be relevant.	There is dialogue, but there are issues with punctuation and/or	The dialogue does not seem authentic to the characters.	The dialogue flows well and is authentic to the characters.
Imagery	There is no imagery.	The imagery is confusing and does not seem related to story elements.	The imagery does not always fit with the other story elements.	The imagery fits well with the other story elements.
Plot	The plot is hard to follow.	There are gaps in the plot.	There are minor points of confusion in the plot.	The plot is clear and easy to follow.
Point of view	The point of view switches narrators at random.	The point of view inconsistent and confusing at times.	The point of view is clear, though there are minor issues with consistency.	The point of view is clear and consistent.
Publication details	The publication elements are missing or completely incorrect.	The publication elements are incorrect.	The publication elements are misleading (inconsistent between content of story and what is presented).	The publication elements are clearly marketing the story appropriately.
Setting	The setting is never clarified.	There are missing details about the setting, without a reason.	Some details of the setting are inconsistent.	The setting is clear and consistent.

* Not all students will have stock character(s) in their stories. Disregard the rubric section about this element if they do not.

Appendix H

Summaries of the Ten Highest Rated Stories (Rurality)

The Blizzard **(#092)**

Katie is taking care of her horses—"mucking," watering, feeding, snuggling, and grooming them—when she hears her mom calling her inside. A blizzard has hit, and Katie does not know how she'll be able to make it safely from the barn to the house. She eventually braves the storm on the back of her best horse, Snow White. Her mom is happy to see her, and when she checks the next day, she sees that all the horses are safe. Snow White gets "the most apples and oats" from then on. (Note: Story #093, written by a classmate of this author, is very similar to this one, only the protagonist, Hannah, gets caught in her barn during a rainstorm.)

The Bridge **(#201)**

On a rainy night, a man is driving home from a business trip. He spots an old man walking along the road and offers him a ride. "Farmer Joe" directs the man to his dilapidated farmhouse across a treacherous old bridge. When the man gets home, he tells his wife about the incident. She is shocked, knowing that the old man actually died ten years ago when the bridge went out during a storm. Sure enough, the young man checks the next day and there is no bridge. "All I could think was, *Farmer Joe finally made it home!"*

Cruise Ship Disaster **(#072)**

Jeff (a 14-year-old "country boy") and Paul (an 18-year-old "city boy") sneak onto the cruise ship on which their parents are vacationing. When there are "issues with the boat," the captain brings the passengers to an island, where the boys' parents discover them, and lots of terrifying events start happening. There is a giant spider that bites a woman, who then turns into a zombie. There is a green monster that the boys help attack and kill. The family, along with Liam, a crew member, get on an empty boat that is passing by. They then fight another huge monster, who ends up killing their dad. The boys and their mom subsequently kill the monster. Then, there is a fight with a shark, but the humans prevail. Eventually, the remaining family members return home, but their town is abandoned (presumably because of a zombie attack). They use survival skills to hunt deer and boil ocean water to drink. They decide to move to Seattle, where "their people" went to live.

Dew on the Horizon **(#236)**

The narrator goes through the seasons, describing bits of what he/she sees, hears, and smells out in nature at each point in the year: birds "tending to their young," flowers blooming, a mom planting in her garden while taking care of her children, and animals storing food in preparation for winter. The text seems more like a piece of poetry than a narrative fiction story, as there is no protagonist/antagonist or conflict/resolution, but it is beautifully written.

***Hillbilly Joe* (#005)**

A man who lives in the mountains—and whom "city people" call "Stinky Joe"—sees a news story about a tree coming to life and hitting someone in the head. Then, he goes to Wal-Mart for groceries and comes across "a poor beggar" in an altercation with the store manager, who has accused the beggar of stealing. The beggar runs outside, and after hearing a loud "THUMP," Stinky Joe goes out and finds the beggar groaning on the ground. He tells Stinky Joe that a tree had attacked him, and Joe realizes it must be the same tree that had attacked the person on the news. So, he solves the problem by cutting the tree with a chainsaw, and ends the story "triumphantly" saying, "'Now the others will listen to me.'"

***The Hunting Story* (#046)**

This text has no clear plot and cannot be considered a true narrative fiction story. It is mostly a catalog of guns used by the characters (two boys and two fathers who are part of a "Hunt Club"), deer the characters have shot, trucks the characters have, and hound dogs owned by the characters (16 in all). One of the boys kills a deer in the end, but he falls over due to the recoil of the gunshot. When his friend asks if he is all right, he replies, "Yeah, at least I killed a deer."

***My Lucky Day* (#077)**

Early one morning, a father wakes up his son for his first big hunting trip. They pick up the boy's uncle, then get situated in the field, looking for deer. At one point, the boy sees a fox about to attack a baby deer, and he shoots the fox to save it. His dad says, "You have a good heart." During the trip, the dad and uncle each kill a buck, but the boy is not successful. They return home to find friends and family who are there to celebrate the boy's first hunting weekend, which continues the following morning. This time, the boy is elated when he shoots and kills his first buck. Afterwards, the whole family and all his friends help clean it, eat it, and celebrate the boy's completion of this rite of passage.

***The Mythical Forest* (#170)**

A boy is walking through the forest when a "big mass" hits him and he falls into a hole. A log rolls on top of the hole, but a "beast" bites through it. The boy situates himself "as far in [the hole] as I could" and waits patiently until the beast finally leaves, then digs his way out. He walks to the highway and encounters a man who has heard the boy is missing. The man takes him home to his parents.

***The Raccoon Thief* (#206)**

A raccoon keeps trying to steal eggs from a chicken farmer, so the farmer sets a trap, catches the raccoon, and sets him free "very far away" from his property.

***The Vines Come Alive* (#184)**

A child is "relishing" nature at the top of a mountain—the "vines, trees, flowers, valleys, rivers, and the forest teeming with life." He* starts to wonder what it would be like if the vines he sees were to come to life—and then it happens, and they tangle around the boy. Eventually, he uses

his knife to free himself, then begins “making my way down the mountain” to his home, a “broken-down building with an untended garden filled with weeds and a hole in the roof where rain could slip in.” He goes to tell his mom what happened . . . but he then wakes up and realizes it was all a dream.

**The gender of the protagonist is not revealed; I decided to use the pronoun “he” when “he or she” became too cumbersome because the author is a boy.*

Appendix I

Codebook

SETTING			
Supercode	**Code**	**Subcode**	**Includes**
Rural	Land Features	Woods/Forest	
		Mountains	*Hills*
		Cave	*Caverns, mines*
		Small Body of Water	*Creeks, ponds, lakes, rivers*
		Trails	*Paths, dirt roads, hiking*
		Open Area of Land	*Clearings, meadows, plains, fields, "land"*
		Farm	*Horses, crops, pumpkin patches, barns*
		Garden	
	Activities	Foraging	*Mushrooms, berries*
		Camping	*Campsites, cabins*
		Hunting	
		Fishing	
	Places	Town/Village	*Neighborhoods, small towns*
		Haunted House	*Haunted Schools*
	Vernacular	Vernacular	
Not Necessarily Rural	Places	"Home"	
		Places Around Town	*Stores, libraries, restaurants, hospitals*
		School	*Preschools, day care centers, elementary/middle/high schools*
		Ocean/Sea	*Excludes beach*
Not Rural	Places	Island	
		Beach	
		Large City	
		Military Location	*Battlefields, war ships*
Fantasy World	Places	Magical forest	
		Kingdom	
		Video Game World	
		Outer Space	
Setting Unclear			*Nothing whatsoever to indicate a location*
PLACE NAMES			
Supercode	**Code**		
Real	United States		

	Abroad		
Not Real	Realistic		
	Fantastical		
PROTAGONISTS			
Code			**Includes**
Animal			
Human			
Mythical Creature			*Dragons, demigods, mermaids, unicorns, God, Satan*
Superhero			*Established fictional characters and ones invented by the author*
Other			*Robot, pencil, alien, pumpkin*
CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS			
Supercode	**Code**	**Subcode**	**Includes**
Parents	Positive Depictions	Especially Nice	
		Generally Nice	
		Remembered as Nice	*The parent is not in the story*
	Caretaking	General Caretaking	*Dance trips, phone calls, errands, nursing when ill*
		Worried/Concerned	*Worrying in a child's absence*
		Food Preparation	
	Powerful		*King/queen, president, mayor, god, wealthy*
	Neutral	Present but Neutral	
		Not in Story but Mentioned Neutrally	
	Unknowing		*Lack of awareness of child's activities*
	Absent		*Absent due to death or abandonment*
	Tragedy		*Tragedy befalls a parent during the story*
	Tension	Rule Enforcers	
		Powerlessness About Big Decisions	*Children feel powerless*
		General Tension	
	Strange Behavior		*Unexpected/callous reactions to serious events*
	Mean/Evil		

	Gender Roles	Gender Norms Followed	*Father works while mom stays at home, father hunts/fishes, father tells "dad jokes"*
		Gender Norms Not Necessarily Followed	*Father cooks breakfast after sleepover, mother is the hero/aggressive*
		Mixed in Same Story	*Both parents work outside the home, mother prepares meals and takes kids fishing*
	Child/Parent Role Reversal	Child Rescues Parent	
		Child Takes on Adult Responsibilities	*Resolving conflict, preparing for Christmas, keeping parent company, sparing parent from harm*
	Surprises	Surprising Revelations About Parents	*Long-lost parents, different biological parents than previously thought, parents familiar with mythical worlds*
	Oddly Agreeable/Permissive	Permission to Go to Unknown Person's Home	*For sleepovers or play dates*
		Permission to Go on a Journey	*Traveling far without adults*
		Permission for Someone to Move in with Family	*Animals, humans*
		Unphased by Serious Events	*Bullying, murders*
Siblings	Especially Nice		*Overtly loving relationship*
	Caretaking/Protective Role		*Standing up for sibling against bullies, caring for sibling after injury, rescuing sibling from danger*
	Generally Nice		*Positive but not effusive*
	Mixed		*Both positive and negative encounters among a set of siblings*
	Neutral		*Siblings mentioned but not described*
	Negative/Antagonistic		*Siblings are enemies*
Twins	Girl + Girl		
	Boy + Boy		

	Girl + Boy		
Pets	Cats		*Farm cats, indoor cats*
	Dogs	Story from Human's Perspective	
		Story from Dog's perspective	
	Other		*Wolf, horse, bunny, parrot*
Grandparents	Positive		
	Neutral		*Grandparents mentioned but not described*
	Negative		
Teachers, Principals, Coaches, Nurses	Especially Nice		
	Generally Nice		
	Neutral		*T, P, C, N mentioned but not described*
	Negative		

BULLYING

Code	**Includes**
Bullying Not Resolved in Story	
Frenemies/Family Bullies	*Siblings, friends who act unkindly*
Taking Action Against Bullies	*Counterattacks planned or executed*
Underlying Reasons for Bullying Behavior Revealed	*Past hurts revealed, compassion given*
Bullies Have Change of Heart	*Join the side of good*
Victim Gains New Friend	*New friend is not the bully*

GOOD VS. EVIL

Code	**Includes**
Good vs. Evil	

HEROISM

Code	**Subcode**	**Includes**
Rescuing Parents/Family Members		
Rescuing Friends	Saving a Life	
	Helping Someone	
Rescuing Others	Protagonist is the Rescuer	
	Someone Else Rescues the Protagonist	
	Other	
Rescuing Self		
Animal Heroism	In Stories with Animals as Major Characters	
	In Stories with Humans as Major Characters	
Avenging		
Superheroes		*Familiar and invented characters*

Sports Heroes	*Running, basketball, wrestling*
Battle Heroes	
Recovering Important Artifacts	*Jewels, lost ball, magical items*
Restoring a Ruler to His/Her Rightful Throne	
Lack of Courage	*Cowardice instead of heroism*
DEATH	
Code	**Includes**
Death of Antagonist	
Death of Protagonist	
Death of Other Major Characters	
Death in Battle	
Death from Natural Disasters	*Sharknado attack, sinkhole, tornado, earthquake*
Death from Accidents	*Car, ship*
Death from Illness	*Cancer, unnamed illness*
Death of Animals	
Deaths Occurring Prior to the Story	
Deaths of Other People (Not Story Characters)	*Casualties from battle*
Attempted Murder	
Near-Death Experiences	
Possible Death	*Death seems to have happened, but mentioned euphemistically*
Cycle of Life	*Fall changes to winter, etc.*
VIOLENCE	
Code	**Includes**
General Violence	*Battles between armed soldiers, beating up an enemy*
Especially Gruesome Violence	*Body parts cut off, excessive blood and gore*
MORALITY	
Code	**Includes**
Morality	*Don't judge people by size; the simple life is best; honesty is the best policy*

RACE			
Supercode	**Code**	**Subcode**	**Includes**
Physical Description	Indication of Race as Black	Discusses Skin Color	*"Dark-skinned" with "I am proud to be African American"*
	Indication of Race as White	Discusses Skin Color	*White skin, pale skin*
		Discusses Hair or Eye Color	*Blue or green eyes, blond hair*
	Indication of Race as Beyond Black or White	Discusses Skin Color and Hair Color	*Caramel skin, tan skin, brown hair*
Names	Suggests Characters Are Black		*Amaya, Amani, Nyeem, Jaheim, Nivea, I'yonte, Lamelo*
	Suggests Characters are Latinx (Ethnicity)		*Carlos, Rodrigo, Juan, Amigo, Basho, Libro, Diego*

RELIGION	
Code	**Includes**
Heaven	
Meditation	*Ninjas meditate then teleport to underworld*
Prayer	
God and/or Devil	
Church Clergy	*Pastor, priest*

SPORTS	
Code	**Includes**
Softball/Baseball	
Football	*Playing or watching*
Running	*Racing*
Basketball	
Soccer	*Playing or watching*
Other Physical Activities	*Dodgeball, "Just Dance," dance competitions, bike riding, jousting, swimming*

TEENAGE LIFE		
Code	**Subcode**	**Includes**
Elementary/Preschool		*Only a few instances of articulating age as the same or younger than the writers*
Middle School	Somewhat in Line with American High School Drama	*Boy/girl romances, "mean girls," "jocks" vs. "nerds"*
	Not in Line with American High School Drama	
High School	Somewhat in Line with American High School Drama	*Boy/girl romances, "mean girls," "jocks" vs. "nerds"*

	Not in Line with American High School Drama	
Just "Teen"		*Unclear whether the teen is of middle or high school age*
College/Young Adult		
Speculated Age (Teen)	Somewhat in Line with American High School Drama	
	Not in Line with American High School Drama	*Boy/girl romances, "mean girls," "jocks" vs. "nerds"*
TECHNOLOGY		
Code		**Includes**
Cell Phones		*Texting, talking, internet searches*
Video Games		*Playing games, entering the world of a game*
TELEPORTATION		
Code		**Includes**
Teleportation		*Teleporting into fantasy worlds, time travel, "portals"*
CLOTHING		
Code		**Includes**
Excessive Clothing Details		*Long descriptions of what characters wear or buy while shopping*
THEMES/MOTIFS		
Code	**Subcode**	**Includes**
Moving	Protagonist Moving	into another person/creature/object
	Friend Moving	Friend of protagonist is moving or has moved
Legend		
Dreams/Visions		*Dreams while asleep (not "hopes"), excludes "it was all a dream"*
Prophecy		
Transformation	Protagonist Transforms	*Magical transformations (not psychological) into another person/creature/object*
	Someone Else Transforms	*Magical transformation into another person/creature/object (not psychological)*

Wise Character		*Characters visit a sage for advice (e.g., The Wizard of Oz)*
Weather	Avalanche/Earthquake	
	Flood	
	Rain	*Excludes storms*
	Sharknado	
	Snow	
	Thunder/Lightning Storm	
	Tornado/Tsunami	
	Volcano Eruption	
Zombies		
Journey		*Characters embark on a meaningful journey/quest*
Vacation		*Characters are on vacation*
Birthday		*A birthday is mentioned or celebrated*
Bed-to-Bed		*An account of all daily events*
Poisoning		*A character is poisoned*
Secret Identity		*A character's secret identity is revealed*
Shipwreck		*Shipwreck/plane crash*
Statues		*A person becomes a statue or vice versa*
Jewelry Heist		*Jewels are stolen from stores, museums*
STORY CONVENTIONS		
Codes		**Includes**
Address to Reader		*Narrator introduces him/herself asks a question, awareness that he/she is in a story*
Advanced Vocabulary		*Sophisticated/unusual words*
Chapters		*Story is broken into chapters or sections*
Happily Ever After		*Story ends with this classic line*
Language Play	Alliteration	*Consecutive names or words begin with the same letter*
	Hyperbole	*Over-exaggeration*
	Naming	*Silly/meaningful names*

	Onomatopoeia	*e.g., "zonk" "vroom" "crash"*
	Personification	*An object or animal takes on human characteristics*
	Simile	*Comparing two things with "like" or "as"*
Openings	Once Upon a Time	*Story begins with this classic line*
	Once	*Once, one time*
	There Was	*There was, it was*
Sarcasm		
Suddenly		*Suddenly, all of a sudden*
Surprise Twists	Substantial	
	Moderate	Surprise, but not a plot twist
	Mild	
To Be Continued		
LITERATURE		
Classic Literature	Within the Curriculum	*e.g.,* A Tree Grows Brooklyn
	Outside the Curriculum	*e.g.,* The Wizard of Oz
Modern Literature	Within the Curriculum	*e.g.,* Hoot
	Outside the Curriculum	*e.g.,* Wonder
Non-Literary Popular Culture References		*e.g.,* Descendants, Batman, Superman

Appendix J

Board of Education, Commonwealth of Virginia
2017 English Standards of Learning Curriculum Framework—Grade 4*

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">READING</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">4.4 The student will expand vocabulary when reading</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">• Develop and use general and specialized vocabulary through speaking, listening, reading, and writing.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">4.5 The student will read and demonstrate comprehension of fictional texts, literary nonfiction texts, and poetry</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">• Describe how the choice of language, setting, and characters contributes to the development of plot.
• Identify the theme(s)
• Summarize events in the plot
• Identify genres
• Identify the narrator of a story and the speaker of a poem
• Identify the conflict and resolution
• Identify sensory words</td></tr>
<tr><td>Essential Understandings</td><td>Essential Knowledge, Skills, and Processes</td></tr>
<tr><td>All students should understand the essential elements and characteristics of fictional text, literary nonfiction, and poetry</td><td>To be successful with this standard, students are expected to:
• describe how an author’s choice of language, setting, and characters develops the plot and contributes to the sequence of events
• describe in depth a character, setting, or event, drawing on specific details from the text (e.g., words, actions, or a character’s thoughts)
• identify genres including but not limited to: fantasy, humor, fable/fairy tale, realistic fiction, historical fiction, folklore/tall tales
• identify the theme(s) of a text (e.g., friendship, survival, determination)
o thematic topic
o lessons learned
• summarize plot events using supporting details
• identify the main conflict and resolution in a poem, section of text, or book</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">WRITING: At the fourth-grade level, students will develop and build their reading and writing skills together. Students will use the writing process to plan, draft, revise, and edit writing in a variety of forms to include narrative, descriptive, opinion, and expository. They will select and narrow a topic, develop a plan for writing, and organize information into several paragraphs with a central idea and supporting details. The instructional focus will include an emphasis on composing and written expression. Revising writing for clarity and editing for usage and mechanics will continue to be important at this grade level. Teachers will encourage the development of writing skills that are foundational to effective written communication and critical thinking. These skills are necessary for success in future postsecondary and workplace environments.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">4.7 The student will write in a variety of forms to include narrative, descriptive, opinion, and expository.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">• Engage in writing as a process
• Select audience and purpose
• Elaborate writing by including details to support the purpose
• Utilize elements of style, including word choice and sentence variation
• Revise writing for clarity of content using specific vocabulary and information</td></tr>
</table>

<table>
<tr><td>Essential Understandings</td><td>Essential Knowledge, Skills, and Processes</td></tr>
<tr><td>All students should
understand that writers use the writing process including planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing
understand the domains of writing include composing, written expression, and usage/mechanics</td><td>To be successful with this standard, students are expected to
write focusing on the composing domain features of central idea, organization, unity, and elaboration
write focusing on the written expression domain features of word choice, specific vocabulary, and sentence variety
use mentor texts as an example of writing
produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to the purpose and audience
recognize different forms of writing have different patterns of organization
narrative
organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally
use transition words and phrases for sentence variety
provide a conclusion
use specific vocabulary to develop a story</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">4.8 The student will self- and peer-edit writing for capitalization, spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, paragraphing, and Standard English.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Use subject-verb agreement
Eliminate double negatives
Use noun-pronoun agreement
Use commas in series, dates, and addresses
Correctly use adjectives and adverbs
Use quotation marks with dialogue
Use correct spelling, including common homophones
Use singular possessives</td></tr>
<tr><td>Essential Understandings</td><td>Essential Knowledge, Skills, and Processes</td></tr>
<tr><td>All students should understand that editing for correct sentence formation, grammar, capitalization, spelling, and punctuation makes the meaning of the writing clearer to the reader</td><td>To be successful with this standard, students are expected to
apply knowledge of the usage/mechanics writing domain
use knowledge of sentence structure to form complete sentences
use reflexive pronouns correctly (e.g., myself, ourselves)
use a rubric to self- or peer- assess writing</td></tr>
</table>

*Retrieved from http://www.doe.virginia.gov. Abbreviated to reflect knowledge and skills addressed by the Promoting PLACE curriculum (Azano et al., 2017a).

Appendix K

Story Example: *My Lucky Day*

Chapter One

One day, my dad woke me up really early. “Why are we up so early?” I said to my dad.

“Haven’t you heard? We’re going hunting.”

“What?” I said. “I thought that was next week when it starts.”

“No, sleepyhead. It starts today.”

“Oh, I must get up and get ready.” I got right up and went to my closet. I looked all around but couldn’t find my camouflage overalls. I looked on my top shelf before I quit—and there they were. I hurried and got them on while my dad got my vest and put the guns in the truck. I hurried to the mud room to get my boots. I got in the truck, but before we left, my baby brother came out.

“Where are you going?” he said.

“We’re going hunting.”

“Oh, can I come?”

Then my dad took over and said, “Not today, just wait until you are older.”

While we were driving, my mom called. I answered the phone. My mom told me to have fun and to tell my dad the same thing. She said, “I love you.”

I said, “I love you, too,” and hung up.

I asked my dad where we’re hunting this time. “We’re going to [name of town withheld] on your Uncle Greg’s land,” he said.

“Oh, cool, I have never been there before.”

“I have not been there either,” my dad said. “We’re going to meet him there.”

“Is he going to go hunting with us or not?” I said.

“I do not know yet, but I hope,” Dad said.

I hope he does too because he is really fun. He is also really good at hunting. I hope one of us kills a deer.

Once we got there, we saw my uncle’s truck. He got out and said, “Well, look who’s here.”

I saw that he was wearing his camo overalls and had his gun, so I knew he was going hunting with us. Even though I knew he was going with us, I still asked.

Since we were there so early, we ate. While we were eating breakfast, three does were running through the woods.

“I guess it’s time to go hunting,” my uncle said.

“I guess so,” I said.

So we finished up all our breakfast [and] got the guns. After we made sure that we had everything that we needed, we headed out to the woods.

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Chapter Two

While we were walking in the woods, I saw a 12-pointer and whispered, “Look.” We all saw the deer, but the deer did not see us. I was about to shoot it, but my uncle didn’t let me.

“Why can’t I shoot it?” I said.

“Because this section isn’t my land.”

“Well, where is your land?” I said.

“Well, it should be right up this hill here.”

Once we got there, I was amazed. It was the best hunting spot ever. There was one problem. “Where’s the hunting stand?” I said.

“It is right there.”

“Where?” I said. “Oh, I see it now, it is just so camouflaged. Don’t you have a hunting tent, too?”

“Yes. I actually have four hunting tents.”

“Wow. Well, what are we hunting in today?” I said.

“It depends. What do you want to hunt in today?”

“I want to hunt in my favorite spot here.”

“Where is that?” My uncle said.

“Are you serious? It’s the hunting stand.”

“Why is the hunting stand your favorite?” my dad said.

“Because it is really tall and very camouflaged.”

So we headed up the hunting stand while my uncle tied the guns up, and then he came too. While he was heading up, we saw a fox chasing a baby deer. I did not want the deer to die, so I shot the fox. We looked down to see if the deer was gone, and the fox was dead.

“Why did you do that?” my dad said.

"I did it because I didn't want the baby deer to die."

"You have a good heart," my dad said.

"Thanks," I said.

Once my uncle got there, we threw down the deer corn. Sooner or later, a whole bunch of does came by the hunting stand to eat the corn. We didn't [shoot] the does because they are the girls. We are trying to get some bucks.

After the does left, we were sitting there for 45 minutes and still saw nothing. Then out of nowhere came two bucks. My uncle and my dad shot at them and they died. They were both 8-pointers. They were both really happy. After they got all their excitement out, they started to talk to me. They said they were just showing me how to do it and I can get the next one, no matter how big it was.

It was about 1:00 p.m., so we went ahead and ate lunch. While we were eating, we talked about [how] I am going to get a deer this season, no matter what. My uncle brought the lunch since we were in a hurry. He brought peanut butter and jelly sandwiches because it attracts the deer and because and it tastes really good.

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Chapter Three

After we were done eating our lunch, we hunted for another hour and a half. We only saw two does and some turkeys. But that is all. After that time, we went back to the camp with the two deer. We put the deer in the back of the trucks. We loaded everything up and left. When we left, we [all] started to go to my house.

Once we got there, I went to my room to change clothes. While I was changing, my dad and uncle were cleaning the deer. Once I was done changing, I went to see my mom and my brother. They were on the couch watching TV. I went over to give my mom a hug, but my brother got to me first. He jumped off the couch and on my back.

I then put him back on the couch and gave my mom a hug. I sat down and watched TV while my dad and uncle were cleaning the two deer. After the show was over, I helped outside.

When I went out there, everyone I knew was there. I asked my dad why. He said, "Your cousin wanted to surprise you with having a big sleepover before your big day tomorrow."

"Oh, cool," I said. So we all went inside to put everybody's bags away. After that, we played on the zipline outside. That night we stayed up playing Fortnite. We stayed up until 12:30 a.m. and then fell asleep.

My dad woke me up at 5:00 a.m. so I could get ready. My [friends] did not have to [get] up then, but they did anyway. They all wanted to go, but there wasn't enough room. So I got my clothes and went in my bathroom to get dressed.

By the time I was ready, it was 5:17 a.m. I told everybody bye and told them to take turns on the PS4.

Once we left, I asked if my uncle was coming. “[He] isn’t going with us today,” my dad said.

“Oh, then are we still going to [his] camp?”

“Yes, we are still going to his camp, just not yet.”

“What do you mean by ‘not yet’?” I said.

“We are going to check on your uncle.”

“OK, but that is too far away.”

“No, it is only seven minutes away.”

“So did he move?”

“Yes, he moved to [name of town withheld].”

“Okay.”

Once we got there, he was dressed and ready to go hunting.

“Are you going with us?” I said.

“Yes, I’m going with you.”

“Dad, you told me he was not going with me today because he had strep throat.”

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Chapter Four

“I was just playing with you,” Dad said.

“But why?”

“Because it’s funny.”

“Well, yeah. It is a little funny.”

So we soon left his house. While we were riding [there], I was playing Fortnite on my phone. We got there at 6:24 a.m. It took us one hour and seventeen minutes to get there.

Once we got there, we went right out into the woods. This time, we hunted in the hunting tent. We saw a 12-pointer eating the corn. My dad told me to shoot it with his gun because his was loaded and mine was not. I steadied my aim and took the shot. I was shy because I might not [have] hit it, but when I looked, he was dead.

I went right out to look at it and I was so happy. We all went right back to the camp and loaded up the deer.

Right then, we went back to my house. Once we got there, everybody was happy. They all wanted to go with me next time, but they couldn’t.

To make it up to them, they stayed another night. We cleaned, cooked, and ate my deer all together. We had the head stuffed and hung in my room. This was the best hunting trip ever, and I hope I can get another deer this season.

The End