Running Head: Rural Music Educator Role Development

A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF RURAL MUSIC EDUCATOR ROLE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to discover the roles and or identities that emerge in educators who teach music in rural areas. The research includes findings that answer the questions, “How do rural music teachers value their success?”, “How has living, or not living, in the community in which you teach impacted the relationship you have with your students?”, and “What are the advantages of working in a rural school district?” The research was conducted by completing one 60 minute interview with each of the participants and by drawing on the experiences of the author of this paper. The findings were analyzed by transcription of each of the interviews. Through analysis, it was determined that four roles or identities emerged in rural music teachers. They are nurturer, builder, teacher/colleague, and community member. Teaching rural music is unique. Rural music teachers need to make a commitment to the communities in which they teach. The builder may not be a satisfying role long term. Teacher and colleague identities need to be fostered. Pre-service teachers need to be taught the importance of small community traditions and values. More research needs to be done in order to give rural music teachers a better understanding of themselves and the benefits of teaching in a small community.

INTRODUCTION

Background, Issues, and Concerns

Rural music teachers face a unique set of challenges including isolation, low enrollments, lack of funds to properly maintain instruments and equipment, and performance and rehearsal spaces that are inadequate or out-of-date (Bates 2011, Isbell 2005). As a result, rural music teaching positions are typically viewed as starter jobs and rural schools in general experience high teacher turnover (Collings 1999). The potential exists for high teacher satisfaction if rural music teachers can develop roles that coincide with the needs, values, and other circumstances of teaching in rural communities. However, there is a general lack of literature to help rural music teachers develop and identify their unique roles in a rural setting. Rural music teachers face a unique set of circumstances. New music teachers who may be teaching in a rural district for the first time may have difficulty adjusting to the nuances of a smaller community. At the current time, pre-service music teachers are not always given the information that they need to succeed and feel valued in these smaller districts.

Practice Under Investigation

The practice under investigation is the general practice of teaching music in rural schools. Rural music teaching, as noted, is viewed as distinct in many ways from suburban or urban music teaching.

School Policy to be Informed by Study

Identifying the unique challenges and advantages of teaching music in rural places could impact many aspects of education ranging from extra-curricular activities to scheduling classes. This study, however, is aimed specifically at teacher development, including pre-service and in-service training and overall professional and administrative awareness of and support for rural music teachers.

Conceptual Underpinning

Yost (2006) discussed the relationship between teacher retention and self-efficacy, someone's concept of her or his own ability or competence. Beyond competence, basic psychological needs for relatedness and autonomy, impact overall satisfaction and intrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Rural music teachers need to develop roles or identities so that they have positive aspects of their job to look forward, because it is the nature of rural music programs to typically look different than the "standard" program. Teachers can build relationships with their students in order to promote a positive classroom atmosphere and increase student achievement.

Statement of the Problem

Current music teacher education (pre-service and in-service is focused on the needs and realities of suburban and urban music teachers (Bates, 2011). It does not prepare teachers adequately for the unique challenges and advantages of teaching in small, rural schools. As a result, teacher retention in these areas is relatively low.

Purpose of the Study

This study is a part of an ongoing effort to learn more about the experiences and perspectives of rural music educators in order to help prospective music educators develop dispositions and identities that will enable them to find professional and personal fulfillment teaching music in rural communities.

Research questions

A survey was conducted that asked a variety of questions related to basic background information, descriptions of the community in which the participants were teaching, how and why the participants came to teach in their current district, if the participants are living in the community in which they teach, if living in the community has impacted their career and the relationship they have with their students and their families, established goals, challenges of the job, how they value their success, the perception of others of rural school teachers, and advantages of teaching in a small rural school. See Appendix A for complete survey.

Null Hypothesis(es)

The null hypothesis is that rural music teacher satisfaction and retention is unrelated to the development of roles unique to rural settings.

Anticipated Benefits of the Study

By completing this study, the hope is to provide administrators, teacher educators, and music educators with a better understanding of what it is like to teach music in a rural

community, as well as the roles that rural music teachers create to find meaning in the uniqueness of their programs.

Definition of Terms

"Rural" education has been given a range of definitions. For the purposes of this study, the rural music teachers included taught at schools that were at least 80 miles from a major metropolitan center and had a student body of less than 250 students enrolled in kindergarten through grade twelve. These teachers also taught all or nearly all grade levels.

Summary

This paper will focus on the role or identities that develop in rural music teachers because of the unique challenges that they face. Current music teacher education does not equip new and in-service teachers for the challenges and advantages or teaching in a rural district, leading to lower teacher retention in these areas. This study will provide administrators, teacher educators, and music teachers with a better understanding of what it is like to teach music in a rural community, and the roles that rural music teachers create to finding meaning in the uniqueness of their programs. It will be found that one role that rural music teachers develop can specifically help with increased student achievement.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Lee (1997) gives an important historical perspective on rural music education and outlines the aims of reformers to "uplift" rural people through music. This was a time of rural school consolidation-an effort to make rural schools more like urban schools. The mentality was that of "one-size-fits-all."

Isbell (2005) outlined a variety of advantages and challenges to teaching music in a small rural school. Advantages included the opportunity of getting to know ones students over the years, the quiet and beautiful surroundings, and being able to create a program that fits the needs of the students. Challenges included insufficient resources, geographic isolation from other music teachers, and scheduling conflicts. Isbell also underscored the differences between rural and metropolitan music teaching.

Two articles explore specific rural music teaching situations. Shand (2007) discusses how a Canadian rural music teacher, Janet Spring, approaches the unique circumstance of rural music teaching. Spring gets her students involved with their community by choosing literature that coincides with the seasonal festivals that are held every year, incorporates music into history lessons and other core curricular classes, and has her band play pieces by Canadian composers. While the article focuses mainly on the importance of exposing Canadian students to the music of their country, there is valuable insight in to the benefits of teaching music in a rural community.

Wilcox (2005) outlined the successful rural music program of Mr. Stan Johnson. Johnson is the instrumental and choir teacher for the Shickley School District in Nebraska. Of the forty-five high school students, thirty-eight are in band and twenty-six are in chorus. Most of

the success of this rural music program lies in the support of the community and the willingness of Johnson hold lessons after his students are finished with other practices. Johnson involves his students in decisions about concerts and programs and challenges them to perform solos and audition for honor ensembles. The success of Johnson's program also lies in the outstanding support from his school administrators and staff.

One qualitative study relative to rural music teaching has been published. Hunt (2009) researches the perspectives on the role of music programs and teachers in rural and urban communities by conducting interviews with individuals who have a stake in the matter. Nine individuals were interviewed and asked questions that would lead to candid answers about rural and urban music programs and teachers. Upon review of the interviews four main themes emerged. They were: Defining the Music Teacher's Role: Community Interaction and Awareness, Understanding Advantages and Challenges, Preparing Music Teachers, and Recruiting and Retaining Music Teachers. It was found that there were different and similar traits identified between rural and urban music programs and teachers.

Bates (2011) discussed the concept of preparing rural music teachers. His paper provides a view of rural music teacher preparation through social theory, information gained from literature about rural schools and social class, and the personal experiences of being a rural student, teacher, and music teacher. It brings to attention the patterns of privilege and oppression within current ideals, standards, and practices. The overall goal is to identify specific problems in preparing rural music teachers and providing possible solutions. Bates also explores possible roles that rural music teachers could develop that might be more sustaining and sustainable.

Gentry, Steenbergen-Hu, and Choi (2011) discussed what role teachers play in students' perception of school in general. Their research shows that teacher enthusiasm, feedback, and content knowledge play an integral role to student motivation, learning, and engagement. The article also reveals the importance of positive and supportive student/teacher relationships. In earlier work about student attitudes toward school, a small group of teachers were found, by the students, as exemplary. Follow up studies offered insights concerning the characteristics, practices, and qualities of these teachers.

Bahtti and Qazi (2011) examined the correlation between academic competence, Grade Point Averages, and factors responsible for students' academic abilities. A survey was given to a nationally represented sample of graduate and post-graduate students to find the factors responsible for academic achievement. Students' scores on the Academic Competence Evaluations Scale and Grade Point Averages, provide evidence to support that factors such as parental support, self-concept, positive teacher relationships and strong motivational orientations are connected with GPAs and academic competence ratings. Students with a stronger presence of these factors have better academic achievement.

While the Bates (2011) writing on rural music teaching contributed theoretically to the conversation, no one has undertaken a systematic qualitative study of rural music teachers' experiences and perspectives. An additional aim of this study is to close this gap in the research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

The author approached this research as both a participant and observer. Respondent #1 taught music in a small rural school for twelve years and now teaches music education methods at Northwest Missouri State University. Respondent #2 taught music in a small rural school for five year and is now a graduate student at Northwest Missouri State University. Subjects in this study include the author, one professor, and three rural music teachers with whom the author was previously well-acquainted.

Study Group Description

Of the three remaining participants, Respondent #3 grew up the eastern United States in a metropolitan area. She had a graduating class of three hundred. Respondent #3 studied music performance at a small liberal arts college as a music education degree was not offered. She became certified to teach as part of a master's degree. Respondent #3 teaches K-12 music in a small rural school: one hundred eighty students K-12. She teaches general music, band, choir, and guitar and is the only music teacher in the district. Respondent #3 is a third year teacher.

Respondent #4 attended a large suburban high school in a large mid-western metropolitan area. He associated almost exclusively with students who were high achievers academically. After exploring other majors including music performance, Respondent #4 opted to become a music teacher. He received his degree, a five-year master's degree program, from a regional, semi-rural university and applied for jobs. He limited his job search to suburban schools and was unsuccessful finding a position. The following year he applied for all available jobs and found his current position teaching K-12 music in a small rural school.

Respondent #5 grew up in a small rural community, with the school housing about 900 students K-12. She attended a small mid-western university and received a bachelor's degree in Instrumental Music Education. She taught for two years in a rural community and then moved back to her hometown, where she is currently the band director. Respondent #5 teaches fifth through twelfth grade band, second through fifth grade general music, and a fine arts appreciation class. While teaching, Respondent #5 also received her master's degree in administration.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

Most biographical data was collected through email. In addition, a 60 minute single interview design was implemented with each of the three rural music teachers and with Respondent #2, the author. The researcher transcribed the interviews and conducted the thematic analysis. Through multiple readings, clear patterns emerged relative to how rural music teachers develop professionally and personally to find meaning and fulfillment in their respective jobs.

Statistical Analysis Methods

After each interview was conducted the author transcribed the content. When the transcriptions were complete the author looked for commonalities and themes that occurred in each of the interviews. Notes were taken and the results of the findings are as follows.

FINDINGS

Four main themes or rural music teacher roles were identified: nurturer, builder, community member, and teacher/colleague.

Nurturer

First, rural music teachers saw themselves strongly in what we call the role of *nurturer* both relative to their students and their overall school music program. This role seemed more important than the role of music teacher or band director. The responsibility to care for individual students and to develop the "whole student" was important, not just developing students' musical talents. Respondent #5 said:

> And I think teaching, for me, more than just the kids knowing music-being able to read a quarter note or a C or whatever, but it's about them developing as a human being.

These teachers know that their programs can thrive when their students feel supported and valued as individuals.

Respondent #1: I was in my fourth or fifth year teaching when the realization hit me that it was more about the students then it was about the music. Now, in retrospect, most of my students don't play their musical instruments, but the relationships we developed at the time still are meaningful and former students most often thank me for the not-directly-musical things they learned in band and other music classes. Overall, they seem to have valued the care I showed for them more than anything else.

Respondent #2: *My thoughts are very similar to Respondent #1's. I do not recall a certain time when I realized that teaching was more about the relationships with my students than the music. The relationship I create with my students has always been on top of my priority list. As*

much as I want my students to value the music that they are creating in my classroom, I want them to have a place in which they feel safe to be themselves and grow in their music abilities.

Respondent #4, on the other hand, identified strongly as a band director. He reported that he enjoyed working with the elementary students, but was frustrated by the high school band's small enrollments and the counter-productive attitudes of some of the students:

> I've got a couple students poisonous to the band, but they are good players and, actually one or two, and when they're absent, everything's so much different, so much different. And, I've worked with the students numerous times. Mom's not very much in the picture. Doesn't have a father. Mom's gone a lot. She's always gone, so he doesn't have a very authoritative figure at home. He's spoiled. He's used to getting what he wants and he's the class clown. He's very much a leader. He's very . . . a lot of potential to be a great leader. He can pull the young kids, but he knows how to push at your buttons. He knows how to, you know . . . so I let a lot of things slide and I let him not get control of me or my emotions so I just ignore, say, "Okay, that's great." You know, that's great. And he might complain, say, "That's too bad. Sorry to hear about that." and go on to somebody else. I've gotten used to doing that, but the attitude in the high school band, it's been really low lately even though they're performing really great, their attitudes have been real low because they're not used to having to work . . . coming to class every day and working.

As part of the nurturer role, rural music teachers are able to focus on the improvement of their programs rather than finding value in success. Rural musical ensembles generally don't perform as well as larger suburban ensembles and this can challenge the rural music teachers' ensemble director role especially in comparative festival settings. Respondent #2 had this to say about the comparative festival setting:

> I would say that they do, but at the same time they're just taking into account what they hear in that one day, which I understand, but that's been something that's kind of been frustrating for me because I've been working with these kids for five years I'm able to hear on a daily basis the strides that they've made and the improvement they've made and I think it's just more difficult for the smaller schools to get those I and II ratings maybe simply because our instrumentation isn't quite what it should be, you know. I know I have a very . . . I mean, my low brass section is three kids. So filling in some of those areas and not having the resources, I think, is maybe part of the reason, too. But, there's also some schools that also are very good and are able to get the I's . . . I and II ratings.

Rural music teachers want their students to focus on the goals that they have achieved and the progress that they have made as individuals and as an ensemble. “My goal has been for the kids to love music…I talked to the kids a lot about setting goals. So we set goals at the beginning of the year and those are the things the kids thought we needed to do and things I thought we needed to do and to meet those goals….Just that the kids are enjoying it, that people are enjoying listening to us, and that we are all having a good time, because if that’s not happening then what’s the point,” Respondent #5 states. Respondent #2 also echoes these thoughts. “You know, when the kids…have realized the progress that they’ve made and *they* know that they’re improving and *they* realize that things have gotten better…I love that.” Respondent #3 shares this concept by relaying this story. “There’s a parade we did and two or three people couldn’t come and then two or three people didn’t show up that day and we already only had eleven so we marched down the road with six people. But, I thought, part of me—there was a half-brain going on—part of me was thinking like other people would see me as I marched down the road with my six people and I thought, “They must think I’m nuts. They must think that I’m nuts. I think they’re right. I think that I *am* nuts.” But the other half of me thought, “No, I’ve got a brand new drum major who needs some experience before we go to the big, the big competition . . . which is a really big thing and I knew we’d all be here for that. It was still going to be small, but it was going to be more than six and I’ve got a brand new quad player that’s gotta learn this; he’s got to have some experience playing that cadence and that’s all I thought about. I thought, “No, I’m not gonna not do it. They need the experience. They’re here. They showed up. We’re marching.” And we did. And we laughed about it as a band. We knew we looked ridiculous. But, I thought, there’s reasons we’re doing this. We’re gonna entertain those folks as we go by and we’re going to do our best. And, we did, so; it was kind of crazy.”

The ability of rural music teachers to focus their attention on the improvement of their programs allows them to possibly think "outside the box." Instead of these teachers being so focused on the ratings they receive at comparative contests, they can more easily address the specific needs of their students in regards to individuality and the skills they are acquiring in a music classroom setting.

Builder

Second, rural music teachers in this study view themselves as *builders*. Rural music teachers find an identity in knowing that it takes time, energy, and patience to build a music program. Respondent #2 simply states that the small rural schools that have successful music programs have teachers that have been there for 10, 15, or even 20 years. These teachers have had the time to build and shape their programs into what they want them to be. Respondent #3 says that she would like to be in her district for a solid ten years. This would enable her to figure out her curriculum, know the goals for all of her classes, and see their assessments. Yet another participant sees her program as ever evolving and changing, not really putting a number of years that it would take to build a program. The reason for this statement being that each year the ensemble is changing, gaining and losing students for various reasons. Respondent #3 has been successful at building a guitar class, allowing her to focus on an aspect of her program that is going well. She states, "Guitar is wonderful; it works really well. In fact, if I look ten years down the road and band isn't here anymore which could easily happen with me or without, I think guitar is the way to go. I do."

In reflecting on practices, as follows, the conclusion was made that not being able to build the ideal program led to decisions to move on to other jobs.

Respondent #1: I think not ever being able to build the ideal ensemble shaped my decision to leave my position in a small rural school. I worked hard to recruit students; in fact, I eventually would just go to the fourth graders at the end of the school year and ask them to choose an instrument for next year's band. And, I tried to influence their decisions so that we could have some balance eventually in the high school. However, some students developed skills more quickly than others, showed more interest, could afford some private lessons, and so forth, so that the high school band never did reach adequate uniformity and balance. Also, even though more than 50% of the students in the school were in the band, it was still not enough for a full ensemble. Furthermore, students didn't always stay in the community through high school. One day four student showed up on my front porch-three brothers and a sister-two trombone players, one baritone player, and a horn player-and told me they were moving to Arizona. In one day my low brass and horn sections were decimated. I identified strongly with the idea that I was building something, but in the end, I didn't see the ensemble building coming to any sort of fruition.

Respondent #2: I've never really thought about it that much, but this ultimately is part of the reason why I left my rural district. I was able to "build" my program to a certain extent, but then everything just went stagnant. I wasn't really gaining or losing students. We just always hovered around thirty five students. A lot of it was class conflict, some of it was school size, and some of it was just feeling like I was always competing with someone or something else for my students. Ultimately, I felt like I had done all I could do to build and make the program successful again after many years of neglect. The students had grown and improve, I had learned a lot about myself as a person and a teacher, and it was time for me to move on.

For the rural music teachers of this survey, the role of *builder* was an important one. These teachers saw the value in committing to a small school program and doing what it took to build the program and make it strong. The understanding is there that it would take years to build a program to the "standard." However, with some, there can be a breaking point. There is only so much adaption, re-organization, and building that can be done before a program levels out. Then these teachers are left with the choice of continuing on for the good of their students and program, or moving on to a new job that might be more fulfilling.

Teacher/Colleague

Third, rural music teachers see themselves as valuable *teacher/colleagues.* They feel like they can contribute to the infrastructure of the school and create a positive and lasting working relationship with other teachers. Respondent #3 points out, "I work on the scheduling committee. I helped that to be created so that I could have a voice there and…my colleagues here respect me about the very much and work-we do the best we can to not let band conflict with anything." Respondent #2 discusses the benefit of getting to know her fellow teachers. She talks about a couple of teachers who have become close confidants for hers even though they are not involved in the music field. It was important for Respondent #2 to have people in the school that she could go for advice, as well as, share the good and bad days with. Respondent #4 talked about a sense of professional isolation. Working closely with other teachers, however, seemed to fill that need.

Community Member

Fourth, rural music teachers saw the value of being a *community member*. By being members of their respective communities, rural teachers are able to connect with their students

on a personal level. Respondent #2 states, "Just getting to know the families, you know, and the community in general…I'm very close with my students. I know them. I know their backgrounds. I know, you know, where they're coming from, what their home life is like for the most part and that really helps me kind of connect with them on a student lever and on a personal level." Having been a teacher that previously commuted to her school, Respondent #5 sees the value in being a member of her student's community. She states the significance of being able to spend the time with students that see previously spent on the road and the enjoyment of building a rapport with parents and faculty members by inviting them over for meals. Respondent #3, too, enjoys the benefits of community stating, "The kids that will be juniors next year, I had them in 8th grade…so I've got one more year and I will have taught everybody…I love that I know everybody in the district. I'm watching them grow up. I know their history. I just love it." By being an active and positive member of the community these music teachers gain support for their programs and activities.

It seems that living in the community makes a significant impact on the rural music teacher's sense of satisfaction. Respondent #2 pointed out that there were challenges with being single and living in the community, "The down side of a smaller school or a smaller community, I think, is getting to know more people quickly if that makes sense. I felt very much kind of alone for a while even though, you know, even though I knew the teachers at school, they all had families, you know, and so, and they were all kind of in their routine, there life all worked and had things kind of down to a science and when I came in I felt welcome, but being single and not really having any friends in the community yet and stuff made it, made it kind of difficult too to feel a part of the community just for a little while and then it just really opened up for me, so . . ." Respondent #4, on the other hand, lived in a metropolitan area and commuted. There were

things he would miss, he reported, about the bigger city if he had chosen to live in the community in which he taught. Of course, rural residents might feel that there is plenty to do. Respondent #4, in other words, had not identified with the values of the community and the behaviors of the community. Living in the community has a lot more to it than physically being there-it means being able to relate to a local set of values and ways of living and being.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In reality, one size does not fit all. This pertains to rural music teachers as well. Teaching in rural areas is unique.

Music teachers need to have a real commitment to the rural places in which they teach. Get to know the people. Care for the children. This includes accepting the values and actions of rural populations-not trying to change or "elevate" them. Appreciation for diversity might be the best bet to recruit rural students and encourage them to teach in rural areas because they will understand and love local people and places more readily than suburban or urban students might.

The builder role does not seem to be satisfying long-term, due to the obstacles of building the typical music program (standard suburban program of large performing ensembles). It is possible, however, to overcome or circumvent this problem. Prospective and in-service teachers could be taught and encouraged to critique the standard and explore alternatives. Music teachers might be able to build strong elementary music programs and high school programs that are workable with smaller ensembles. Or, a strong high school program could be less about ensemble performance and more about the individual performance (as in Rachel's guitar program).

Foster the teacher and colleague identities. Whereas rural music teachers find it difficult to be the typical band or choir director, they can identify as teachers-people who help others learn regardless of the specific subject matter. This identity also enables them to relate more closely with colleagues. Music teacher education programs could include ample interaction with majors from other subject areas as well as field experiences with non-music teachers.

Teach pre-service music teachers about the importance of traditions and values associated with small communities. It would be preferable to recruit teachers from rural areas-teachers who already understand rural life and ideals. However, this would require a re-structuring of how music teachers are recruited solely based on performances ability. Teachers who are not already committed to small rural community values, would benefit from closely monitored field experiences in rural places. These students would be monitored by knowledgeable teacher educators who can guide perspectives away from bias and unfair musical, cultural, and personal judgments.

In general, it is imperative that the leading music education organizations start re-defining the definition of a “standard” music program. It might be that rural music teachers would be more apt to stay in the smaller communities, if they felt like their programs were valued by the music education community, regardless of whether their program has established large ensembles.

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APPENDIX A

Please tell me about your background. Where did you grow up and attend school?

Please describe your elementary and high school.

Please describe your community. Was it a farming or industrial community?

Did you participate in band?

What made you decide to teach music?

What lead you to teach in your current district?

Was there a reason you chose a rural over suburban or urban district?

Is this your first full time teaching job?

What are your long term career goals?

Do you live in the town in which you work?

How has this impacted your job?

How has it impacted your relationships with students and their families?

What are your goals for music teachings?

What do you ultimately want to accomplish with your students?

How long do you think it would take a small school to build a strong band?

What are the challenges you face, as a teacher and with your program, by being in a rural district?

What is the average ratio of the student body and band members?

Does the level of commitment of your students vary?

What is the musical background of your students outside of school?

Do you interact with area directors?

Do you interact with directors from larger communities?

What makes you successful as a music teacher?

How do you know you have been a successful band director?

Do you think there are some skills needed specifically to teach in a rural school that might not be important in a suburban or urban school?

What are some of the advantages of teaching in a small rural school?

Do you think growing up in a rural area/school helps you be successful at teaching in a rural school?