There’s No There There: Experiences of Six Rural Music Educators

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What is rural?

- Census Bureau defines rural as any area not within an urban area (Urbanized Areas=50,000+ people, Urban Clusters=2,500-50,000 people)-Fringe, Distant, Remote

- “For many people—too many people—[Iowa, Maine, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont] seem to be what they imagine rural America to be: mostly white, reasonably well-off, wonderfully uncomplicated, and withering away in a global economy. That myth is part of what keeps rural education on the margins of national debate about education policy.” (Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Klein, 2012, p. 20).
Figure 1. Percentage distribution of public elementary and secondary students, schools, and districts, by locale: School year 2010-11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Suburban</th>
<th>Town</th>
<th>Rural</th>
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<tr>
<td>Students</td>
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<td>34</td>
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<td>Schools</td>
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<td>32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Districts</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
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NOTE: Regular districts exclude regional education service agencies and supervisory union administrative centers, state-operated agencies, federally operated agencies, and other types of local education agencies, such as independent charter schools. Schools with no reported enrollment are included in school totals but excluded from student totals. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

(Sub)Urbanormativity

 ✤ Fulkerson and Thomas (as cited in Bates, 2016)

 ✤ “Cities are associated with a range of positive values: prosperity and progress, education and refinement, cosmopolitanism and diversity. In contrast, those living in the country are associated with poverty and backwardness, ignorance and crudeness, boredom and homogeneity. And as the world becomes increasingly urban, the effect is not only demographic but cultural as well.”
Common Challenges

(from Budge, 2006)

- Low population density and isolation
- School and community interdependence
- Oppression as lived experience
- History of conflict regarding purposes of schooling
- “Out migration” of young talent
- Salient attachment to place
Joys of Rural Teaching

- Strong sense of and/or connection to the community (Bates, 2011; 2013; Corbett, 2009; Isbell, 2005, Spring 2013)

- More differentiation (Bates, 2011)

- Great deal of flexibility/autonomy (Bates, 2011)

- Often less red tape and easier access to administration (Mullins, 1998)
Participants
Participants

- Aaron: 16 years experience, 2nd year in current district and teaches K-12 elementary, band, and choir in WY. Has held six positions, including current one.
- Brenda: 21 years at current position in rural WV teaching elementary music.
- Joelle: Been teaching for 17 years in MO, 5 at her current school. Teaches K-12 music-elementary, band, and choir.
- Jessica: 19 years experience in same NC school teaching MS/HS band and music theory.
- Katie: 19 years experience in MS, current position since 2011. Teaches MS/HS Band.
- Susan: Started teaching in 2009, current position since 2012. Teaches pre-K-12 music, band, and dance/music appreciation in NM.
Most of the teachers said that the depth of contextual knowledge about their students was a strength of rural teaching.

“Because my district is so small it is easier to learn as much as possible about the students and their families.” — Susan

“It’s not, ‘hey, clarinet #32’-I experienced that a lot at [practicum placement in big town].” — Joelle

Some also indicated that they felt their students needed them more that in other places.

Katie believes she knows her students well, but she also did in a previous more “urban” position. “I don’t think they leaned on me as much [in the urban school].”

“Kids in more rural districts need more compassion and a hug… bigger-district kids didn’t need as much hand-holding.” — Susan
Universities did not prepare them for rural teaching

- Every teacher agreed that their experience in university was focused on content and not on the specifics of rural teaching.
  - “College doesn’t prepare you for teaching the whole student.” – Aaron
  - “It wasn’t really spoken about—more focus on content and not so much where people are from.” – Katie
  - “…never talked about pueblos or reservations.” – Susan
  - “If they’re still doing Ed Psych 101-positive/negative reinforcement—there’s a lot going on with kids that’s not being addressed.” – Brenda
  - “Universities don’t prepare for [lack of] budgets.” – Jessica
Community Challenges

- All of the teachers talked about the impact of poverty on their students and their teaching. Most made no distinction between rural and poverty, even when asked explicitly.
  - Katie responds to the poverty issues by trying to make her class an escape. “I say, ‘you can talk to me, but leave your problems at the door.’”—Katie
  - Andrew’s school provides students with food, showers, and laundry.
  - Susan’s school received a grant that pays for all students to receive free breakfast and lunch.
  - Joelle sees evidence of poverty in students wearing the same clothes everyday. “I have a blanket statement. Let me know if you need something.” Kids fundraised for dress clothes for concerts.
Community Challenges, cont.

- Drug abuse was an issue in most communities.
  - Joelle said the issue in her community is mostly meth. She had a senior recently arrested for the drug and another student quit band in her senior year because she knew she could not pass a drug test.
  - “I don’t see drug abuse, but I hear about it.”—Katie
  - Susan said that there is “lots of drug abuse.” Mostly alcohol and pot. She had a student die last year from alcohol poisoning while drinking in a friend’s home with the parents home and aware of the activity.
Four of the teachers indicated that their student population was “mostly White”.

None of the teachers with mostly White students said that they have observed racism among their students.

Brenda did share that a 3rd grade teacher referred to someone as a “towelhead” and that she has seen students at school with “Lock Her Up” t-shirts, which she believes is the influence of the parents.

Andrew shared that there have been some issues with parents, but that it’s very few.
Racial Diversity, cont.

- Katie and Susan teach in more racially diverse schools. Katie’s school is about “50% White, 50% Black, and 5% other” and Susan’s school is 60%+ Native American, 25% White, 15% Hispanic.

- Katie explained that the Jemez and Zia pueblos leads discussions with their students about race and culture. She said, “there is some tension with the Native students. They are more disrespectful to the White students.”

- Susan explained that the “kids are fine” but the community had some issues with the consolidation of her school and a 100% Black school that occurred last year.
Complicating Issues

Most education students would like to teach in areas similar to where they are from (Reininger, 2012) or in close proximity to where they are from (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005).

Most attended a suburban school (Kelly, 2003).

Some (25%) see themselves teaching in a rural area (Elpus, 2015).
“Growth in rural school enrollment is outpacing non-rural enrollment growth in the United States, and rural schools are becoming more complex with increasing rates of poverty, diversity, and special needs students” (Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Klein, 2012, p. 21).