

Thinking Critically about Rural Music Education

By

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Abstract

Thousands of music teachers in North America still teach in a diverse array of rural settings. Many find lifelong fulfillment in these positions, but there are also many who move on to metropolitan places as soon as possible. In this paper, I explore how urbanormativity—ideologies that privilege metropolitan places and values—can frame rural music teaching from a deficit perspective, rather than acknowledging the many assets of teaching music in rural settings. I discuss five suggestions for rural music teachers, administrators, policy-makers, and teacher educators. First, embrace the benefits of smallness. Second, honor local musical preferences and traditions. Third, shape the program to the needs of the community. Fourth, teach for eco-literacy or, in other words, help maintain and preserve the natural environment within which rural schools and communities are situated. Fifth, recruit rural students to become music teachers. Ultimately, rural music programs can be sites for innovation and transformation in music education.

Keywords: rural music education, urbanormativity, place

After 30 years teaching elementary and secondary music in Small Town, USA, Mrs. Whitaker retired. Most of the town showed up for her final concert. The president of the local school board got up at the end and extolled the devotion of this lifelong educator and the positive force she had been in the school and the community. Of course, Mrs. Whitaker was not leaving Small Town; she would continue to play the organ at the local church and give piano lessons. Around town, folks would know her for her well-trimmed yard and productive garden. After all, Small Town was her home. She and her husband had raised five children here, and some of her grandchildren now attended local schools. At the university where she earned her music teaching license “back in the day”, she was told she had the talent and demeanor to become a concert pianist and maybe teach in a prestigious university school of music. She certainly could have taught in a much larger suburban district and developed some of the best sounding ensembles in the state. However, she chose Small Town. Moreover, she would not trade it for anything.

Mrs. Whitaker is a fictional amalgam of elements I have drawn from 25 years of professional experience teaching in rural schools, interacting with other rural music teachers, and preparing rural music educators in the midwestern and western United States. There are thousands of rural music teachers similar to her in a variety of ways.¹ Many spend their entire careers in small and rural schools. They dedicate their lives to local communities, sometimes teaching multiple generations and even multiple subjects. They see many of their “best and brightest” students move away to “bigger and better” things in the city.² They develop lifelong friendships with neighbors and colleagues. They are less likely than their suburban or urban peers to be known in the profession for large, balanced ensembles³ but they are known locally and revered for generations. Local experiences within a tight-knit community often bring a sense of belonging and fulfillment.⁴

Of course, not all rural music teaching positions are the same; if there is one quality that could apply to all small town and rural schools, it is, paradoxically, their diversity.⁵ They include positions in villages situated not far from metropolitan areas, to “consolidated” or county schools serving students from multiple communities, to schools in isolated communities of various sizes located far from cities. Some rural schools are not even located in towns but instead on the prairie or in high desert valleys, serving the needs of surrounding farms and ranches. Quite a few of America’s rural schools are located on Indian reservations.

The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) shows that 18.4% of all students live in rural areas and 11.4% live in towns, with 5% percent of all students living in places considered remote in relation to metropolitan centers.⁶ It might be surprising at first to know that of all 13,491 school districts in the United States, a vast majority are either rural (7,156) or town (2,486) districts. Demographically speaking, roughly 70% of rural and small-town students are white, 17% Hispanic, 10% Black, 1.5% Asian, and just over 2% American Indian/Alaskan Native. Around 20% of rural and town students live in poverty. Some parts of the rural United States have seen population growth in recent decades, particularly places associated with recreation, tourism, and sustainable energy. Overall, rural populations continue a gradual decline⁷; however, there are plenty of people living in rural America for whom conscientious, committed, and creative music teachers can do a world of good.

Urbanormativity

The NCES uses what they call an “urban-centric” classification for rural or town schools, identifying them according to their proximity to or distance from metropolitan centers. To most people, of course, it would seem absurd to classify cities by how far they are from rural places. In fact, colloquially, people refer to isolated places as being “in the middle of nowhere”

(although Winnemucca, Nevada refers to itself as “half-way to everywhere”). Suffice it to say that cities constitute the center or the norm, and rural places are known for their relative distance from that center. This practical approach to conceptualizing geographical locations may be in itself innocuous, but sometimes people extend it beyond geographical location, centering urban or suburban practices, values, and norms over rural ones. Addressing this urban-centricity in rural education generally, critical rural theorists Gregory Fulkerson and Alexander Thomas have introduced the term *urbanormativity*:

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. Moreover, as the world becomes increasingly urban, the effect is not only demographics but cultural as well.⁸

The “urban” in urbanormativity relates to places with high concentrations of people and with a preponderance of human-constructed environments. This may be confusing, given that “urban” has been used in education to refer to inner-city schools, especially where there are high concentrations of Black or Latinx students. Consequently, it is essential to underscore that the general use of “urban” in urbanormativity is more synonymous with “metropolitan” and includes suburbs and exurbs. It is also more synonymous with “urbane”; as described by Fulkerson and Thomas, urbanormativity is mainly about cultural and practical norms—general expectations for how “normal” people and societies behave or function, thereby making rural norms and values seem strange or backward. In other words, it connotes a general sense for how things ought to be and does not necessarily apply to the cultural values of everyone; individual residents in rural places might adopt or promote urbanormativity, while individual urban residents might not.

Urbanormativity, nonetheless, can have a negative impact on rural music teachers and students by setting expectations for “excellence” in music teaching and learning that are based on realities, beliefs, values, and possibilities associated more strongly with metropolitan areas.⁹ For example, performance in large ensembles (bands, choirs, orchestras)—more likely to be the norm in metropolitan than in rural areas—serves as the primary standard by which small-town and rural music programs are measured.¹⁰ Furthermore, urbanormativity privileges musical genres that developed and are also more likely to be encountered in cities, such as classical music and jazz. Musical genres such as country music, typically associated with rural places, are often ignored or denigrated. Qualities wherein rural people and places diverge from urban norms tend to be perceived as deficiencies—as problems with which intrepid rural music teachers must contend.¹¹

Historically, school music in rural American was part of more general urbanizing efforts focused on reforming and rehabilitating rural people and cultures.¹² “Making rural schools more and more like urban ones often meant that policies and practices developed for city schools were implemented in rural communities far removed from the particular problems, circumstances, and socioeconomic context originally envisioned and addressed.”¹³ In music education, this included efforts to overcome, through classical music and large ensemble performance,¹⁴ what was perceived as rural backwardness. Music education reformers of the early 1900s characterized rural music as “blatant emptiness,” “vulgar,” “the cheapest trash,” “low grade,” taking place in “unattractive settings,” and “positively offensive to good taste.”¹⁵ Of course, musical interventions into rural schools were well-intentioned: “Everyone believes that music contributes to finer living. And everyone agrees that children of rural communities deserve all the advantages which today are offered to children in city schools...”¹⁶ A lot has transpired since the

early 1900s in the field of education relative to cultural inclusivity and diversity, and it is much easier now to recognize the cultural imperialism baked into these good intentions.

Although recent efforts are more balanced, they may still reinforce deficit ideologies that, at best, fall short of their intentions and, at worst, disparage rural students for their cultural differences and failure to conform to urban norms.¹⁷ To explore this further, I will draw from Daniel Isbell's 2005 *Music Educators Journal* (MEJ) article, "Music Education in Rural Areas: A Few Keys to Success"; Isbell brought welcome attention to rural music education and provided valuable insights. I was teaching in a small, rural school at the time, and recall how appreciative I felt that MEJ was addressing the unique needs of rural music educators. Here are some of the problems that Isbell noted at that time:

Insufficient resources, geographic isolation from other music teachers, and other specific challenges of a rural setting can overwhelm even the most experienced music teacher.

Low enrollment can place strains on the performance abilities of instrumental and choral groups and force rural teachers to be creative with instrumentation, repertoire choices, and scheduling conflicts. The problem of low enrollment is often exacerbated by frequent teacher turnover, which typically results in students leaving the program. Instruments are often in disrepair, and there are no funds to fix them. Performance spaces and rehearsal facilities, if they exist, may be inadequate or out-of-date.¹⁸

Isbell effectively identified a range of challenges faced by rural music teachers. From a more rural-centric perspective, however, some of these challenges can be seen as advantages or possibilities.¹⁹ For instance, rural residents tend to consider isolation a somewhat positive aspect of rural life, affording welcome freedom and solitude. They are likely to value living near the natural environment, and they appreciate "wide open spaces."²⁰ While this may separate them

from other music teachers geographically, rural music teachers can form close bonds and identify with teachers of other subjects within the school where they work. In fact, music teachers whose teaching reflects the values and realities of their rural communities, who immerse themselves in the place and culture, will likely feel less isolated socially and culturally than those who try to maintain geographic or cultural distance. Low enrollment can also be an advantage; at least, it is considered an advantage by most teachers outside of music since it allows more time to work with individual students. Finally, rural music teachers do need adequate resources. Still, lower levels of funding might not be as much of a deficit as one might think. Do rural programs need elaborate performance venues or expensive musical instruments in order to meet the musical needs of rural students? Consider the differences in cost between performing in a band or orchestra in a concert hall versus playing traditional country, conjunto, or bluegrass instruments on the porch, in the living room, or the woods.

Perhaps the high rate of turnover among rural music teachers is directly attributable to the urbanormativity of American music education. Faced with obstacles to replicating the model metropolitan music program, with large competitive ensembles and their requisite "feeder systems," and without adequate professional support in developing common-sense alternatives, rural music teachers can become discouraged and move on to jobs with fewer "obstacles" and a greater likelihood for professional validation.²¹ Here is where one of Isbell's suggestions is particularly helpful: "A rural music teacher's willingness to take risks and try new approaches in organization and pedagogy, even if those changes seem radical at first, will keep the music program fresh and engaging year after year."²² This is important advice; rural schools can be sites for innovation in music education. Just as people from metropolitan areas look to rural places for fresh fruits and vegetables, we might also look to these same places for innovative

approaches to music teaching and learning, “new” approaches and pedagogies rooted in rural values and traditions.

Practical Suggestions for Rural Music Educators

Much can be gained by reframing perceived deficits as assets, more fully honoring geographical as well as social aspects of rural places. Instead of just “making the most out of a difficult situation,” rural music teachers can build from many real advantages that are integral parts of rural life and rural teaching. To this end, I offer the following five suggestions for rural music teachers, administrators, policy-makers, and teacher educators.

First, embrace the benefits of smallness. As mentioned previously, with fewer students and teachers, everyone can get to know each other well, and there is more time to mentor students and cultivate instruction to meet individual interests and needs.²³ In fact, music teachers can focus on meeting long-term musical needs, fostering forms of musicking in which their students might engage throughout life. A full gamut of the usual instrumental and choral ensembles may still be a viable possibility in larger rural and town schools. Sometimes schools will choose to focus on one large ensemble—concert band, for example. In these cases, however, great care should be taken to ensure that the large ensemble of choice best reflects the needs and values of the students and the community. A more sustainable option may be to foster multiple alternatives to large and/or performing ensembles. Class guitar, for instance, can equip students with skills that can be applied in a variety of contexts outside of school and throughout life. According to one rural music educator, “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.”²⁴

Second, honor local musical preferences and traditions. Rather than trying to change rural musical tastes and preferences, music teachers might understand and nurture these roots. One promising approach is to get out into the community and learn about the musics that students and their families value, and then work backward from there—a genealogy of sorts. Eventually, for many rural students, these lines will fade into aural/oral musical traditions that preceded recordings. This is reflected in what rural education researcher and scholar, Michael Corbett, refers to in suggesting that, “music education can and should draw on vernacular, hybrid, and improvisational rural musical traditions and practices.”²⁵ However, because music teacher preparation programs still do not typically include serious treatment of these traditions, rural music educators may need to educate themselves. The PBS documentary series, *American Roots Music*,²⁶ is an appropriate, engaging, and informative starting place. Once traditions have been honored and deepened, it is okay to venture further. utHowever, the aim should always be to return home, to stay grounded.

Third, shape the program to the needs of the community. In fact, a strong sense of community is a primary asset in rural music education.²⁷ This doesn’t necessarily mean that people are all the same; again, rural people are diverse. What it does mean is that in rural communities, people tend to interact on a regular basis and pull together in times of need.²⁸ School music ensembles are expected to contribute to this social cohesion by performing at community events.²⁹ To this end, programs could be adapted to reflect how community members currently engage in music. There was a time when many small rural towns had wind bands, sometimes multiple wind bands and orchestras. However, that time is long past.³⁰ Maybe it is time to move beyond bands, orchestras, and choirs in favor of alternatives that may be a better fit for the community and easier to develop for the music teacher. The internet can provide valuable

assistance if local expertise is not available. A *Washington Post* article described a Polycom program whereby students took individual music lessons in rural Nebraska from private instructors in New York City, leading to an increase in the number of students who qualified for the all-state band.³¹ However, considering how few students continue playing band instruments after graduation, other ensembles might better fulfill long-term needs for musical expression. Popular and folk music ensembles, for example, may still proliferate in some rural areas and could meet the needs of the community while also being more viable alternatives for smaller schools.

Fourth, teach for eco-literacy or, in other words, help maintain and preserve the natural environment within which rural schools and communities are situated. Immersing oneself in the community and their traditions may be easiest for teachers who live in the communities where they teach.³² I am not referring to just residing there, but really *living* there. Successful rural music teachers often shop, seek entertainment/recreation, and worship where they live and teach. They grow gardens. They take long walks, drives, and/or bike rides. They get to know the land with all its flora and fauna—the unique combinations of life, weather, water, and terrain that make each place matter. In fact, appreciating the land is another core rural ideal.³³ Music education philosopher, Daniel Shevock, has explored in detail how music teachers can extend the classroom into the natural environment where students can make music to complement the sounds generated by weather, water, plants, insects, and animals. He also discusses how local musical traditions are intimately connected to geographical place and he suggests an array of practices that can enhance “eco-literacy”—awareness of and care for the natural environment.³⁴

Fifth, recruit rural students to become music teachers. Given the above suggestions, it is likely that the most effective rural music teachers will be those who have grown up in and are,

thereby, intimately familiar with and appreciative of rural places. The primary obstacle to success in rural music education, in this regard, might be the urbanormativity of university schools of music and the people who train music teachers, including everyone who has a hand in working with prospective music teachers.³⁵ Hence, music teacher preparation might also be where the most significant potential lies in transforming rural music education.³⁶ This could include recruiting prospective teachers from rural places but could also involve efforts to prepare all music education students to teach in rural settings if the opportunity or need arises. The geographical place is an important element of diversity and, as with all forms of diversity, prospective music teachers can learn to see assets where they previously saw only deficits. Admittedly, rural music teachers recruited from metropolitan schools may find these assets challenging to see, but then teacher educators have a responsibility to encourage and guide critical thinking and to deconstruct deficit ideologies. It is a process similar to that of opening minds to diversities related to race, ethnicity, gender, class, disability, and so forth.

Still, in the end, it does come down to the labor of local music teachers within local places.³⁷ A lot depends on each teacher's perspectives on music, teaching, and learning and how these perspectives shape their interactions with others. If the goal is high levels of performance in large ensembles and within classical music traditions, rural music teaching is more likely to be a disadvantaged position. If, on the other hand, the goal is long-term fulfillment as a teacher, empowering and preparing students for life-long musicking within traditions that they will cherish, then rural places offer at least as much potential as anywhere else. If the goal is to live peaceably and in harmony with the natural environment, within a "tight-knit" community, and where deeply rooted musical traditions are preserved and nurtured, rural places are the places to be.

Notes

1. Given that over 7,000 rural school districts in the US, “thousands” seems like a safe assumption.
2. Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas, *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009).
3. Some researchers have shown that rural students and ensembles do tend to perform at lower levels in comparison to their suburban and urban peers: Martin J. Bergee, “Validation of a Model of Extramusical Influences on Solo and Small-Ensemble Festival Ratings,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 54 (2006): 244–256. David Rickels, “A Comparison of Variables in Arizona Marching Band Festival Results,” *Journal of Band Research* 44, no. 1 (2008): 25–39.,
4. That rural music teachers can develop a strong sense of place is discussed by Julia Brook, “Place-based Music Education: A Case Study of a Rural Canadian School,” *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 15, no. 4 (2016): 104–126.
5. For a summary of diversity in rural schools, see Stephanie Tuters, “Conceptualizing Diversity in a Rural School,” *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 19, no 7 (2015): 685–696.
6. National Center for Educational Statistics, “Rural Education in America,” <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/students.asp>
7. John Cromartie, “Rural Areas Show Overall Population Decline and Shifting Regional Patterns of Population Change,” United State Department of Agriculture, September 5, 2017, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2017/september/rural-areas-show-overall-population-decline-and-shifting-regional-patterns-of-population-change/>

8. Gregory M. Fulkerson and Alexander R. Thomas, eds., *Studies in Urbanormativity: Rural Community in Urban Society* (New York: Lexington Books, 2013), 5–6.

9. For a more in-depth discussion of urbanormativity in music education, see Vincent C. Bates, “‘Big City, Turn Me Loose and Set Me Free’: A Critique of Music Education as Urbanormative,” *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 15, no. 4 (2016): 161–77; and Anita Prest, “Editorial Introduction: Recognizing the Rural,” *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 15, no. 4 (2016): 1–11.

10. See Author.

11. For an exploration of the struggles faced by rural music educators and how they shape identity, see the qualitative analysis done by Brooke Dake, “A Qualitative Analysis of Rural Music Educator Role Development.” Masters Thesis. Northwest Missouri State University, 2012.

12. I explored this history in more detail in Author.

13. Sher and Rosenfeld 1977, 34

14. Vincent C. Bates, “Drawing from Rural Ideals for Sustainable School Music,” *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 12, no 1 (2013): 24–46.

15. Quoted in Author.

16. Ibid.

17. Daniel J. Shevock also critiques deficit perspectives of rural music teaching and learning. “Music Educated and Uprooted: My Story of Rurality, Whiteness, Musicing, and Teaching,” *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 15, no. 4 (2016): 30–55.

18. Daniel Isbell, page 30. Music education in rural areas: A few keys to success. *Music Educators Journal*, 92 (2): 30–24, November 2005.

19. This should by no means be taken as a personal attack on Professor Isbell. He was the first, in the contemporary period, to address rural music education in the *Music Educators Journal*. He ought to be respected for his pioneering work.

20. *Wide Open Spaces* is the title for a popular Country song by the Dixie Chicks.

21. I watched many of the music teachers I taught at university begin teaching in rural places and then move on to suburban schools. Many studies explore rural teacher retention in general: Jeremy Watts, "An Exploration of Teacher Retention in Rural School Districts in Eastern Kentucky." Ph.D. dissertation. University of Kentucky, 2016; Luke C. Miller, "Working Paper: Understanding Rural Teacher Retention and the Role of Community Amenities." Center for Educational Policy and Workforce Competitiveness. University of Virginia.

22. Isbell.

23. Catherine Hunt, "Perspectives on Rural and Urban Music Teaching: Developing Contextual Awareness in Music Education," *Journal of Music Teacher Education* 18, no. 2 (2009): 37–47.

24. Dake, 15.

25. Corbett, Michael. 2016. Music education and/in rural social space: Making space for musical diversity beyond the city. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 15 (4): 12–29. doi:10.22176/act15.4.12, page 12.

26. <http://www.pbs.org/americanrootsmusic/>. Most American popular genres (country, R&B, hip-hop, rock) derive from American roots music, a complex mixture of diverse musics from European, African, and Native American groups.

27. The community is a common theme in rural music education research. See Andrea VanDeusen, “‘It Really Comes Down to the Community’: A Case Study of a Rural School Music Program,” *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 15, no. 4 (2016): 56–75.

Bates (2013) summarizes evidence to associate rurality with a strong sense of community.

28. This rural characteristic is discussed in research by Anita Prest. 2016. Social Capital as a Framework for Music Education Research.” *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 15, no. 4 (2016): 127–160.

29. Hunt (2009), Prest (2016)

30. Jere T. Humphreys, “An Overview of American Public School Bands and Orchestras before World War II,” *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* 101 (Summer, 1989): 50–60.

31. Matt McFarland, “The Technology that Helps Band Kids in Rural Nebraska Unlock Their Potential,” *The Washington Post*, November 15, 2013.

32. Brook (2016).

33. For a more in-depth discussion of rural values, see Author. See also Brook (2016).

34. Daniel J. Shevock, *Ecoliterate Music Pedagogy*. Routledge New Directions in Music Education Series. (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2017)

35. Bates (2016) discusses this in more detail.

36. Some schools or departments of music include, within teacher education, a significant degree of musical flexibility, although it seems that innovations such as these are often aimed at including Hip Hop and Rock, genres that are more urban than rural.

37. Qualitative accounts indicate that rural music educators strongly value the places where they live. See Janet Spring. 2016. "The Power of Metaphor in Rural Music Education Research," *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 15, no 4 (2016): 76–103.

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