Research Article

A Pilot Project Exploring Rural Classroom Music Teachers' Perceptions and Practices via an Online Professional Development Course

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Abstract

Music teachers in urban, suburban, and rural communities face a multitude of challenges and opportunities. To identify and examine specific experiences that may be unique to rural general music teachers, we recruited six teacher-participants to complete a 5-week online professional development (PD) course for this exploratory study. We created a teacher-led approach for this PD, implementing topics and solutions generated by the participants. Using qualitative content analysis, we found two categories of themes in the online discussion posts that either connected or disconnected our participants with other music teachers on their general music context or their geographic setting. Although participants clearly articulated the influences of setting and place-based pedagogy, we found shared issues related to general music that transcended location. Implications for future PD include the importance of online delivery methods and developing PD differentiated by teaching contexts and geographic settings.

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Teaching general music is a complicated, multifaceted endeavor that differs depending on school, district, and community (Richmond, 1991). Because the *rural* community context is not well represented in the scholarship on general music, we chose this setting in which to explore music teachers' perspectives and practices in a teacher-led (Johnson et al., 2019) online model for professional development (PD). We explored the role of teachers' general music context on their PD needs, and the influence of rurality on general music teaching.

Review of the Literature

Rural Education Research

In the literature, there is no consensus on the definition or description of "rural"; scholars use the term as both a *geographical location* and a *theoretical construct* (Hawley et al., 2016). In this study, we used the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, n.d.) system: rural school districts are labeled *fringe*, *distant*, or *remote* in terms of their distance from urban areas (densely populated areas of ≥50,000 people), and urban clusters (dense groups of 25,000–50,000 people; https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruralEd/definitions.asp). The NCES system explains how, despite their rural "feel," some rural districts are actually quite close to urban areas (fringe) and others are geographically remote. Other classifications used by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Census Bureau create confusion. This variance in the way agencies and researchers define *rural* contributes to a concern that findings identified as *rural* do not uniformly pertain to rural settings (Hawley et al., 2016). Brown and Schafft (2011) assimilated U.S. Department of Agriculture, Census, and NCES methods into a multidimensional definition of rural including: (a) population, settlement structure, and landscape; (b) economy; (c) types of institutions; and (d) sociocultural elements.

Similarly, scholars have traditionally placed a line of demarcation between *urban* and *rural* music education phenomena. Broad labels, however, are not subtle enough to account for the sociopolitical, demographic, and educational diversity within each category, and they belie the fact that researchers have *not* found important, or consistent differences between rural and urban people's attitudes and beliefs (Lichter & Brown, 2011). Nevertheless, it seems commonsensical to assume that music teaching would look and feel different from big city to small town, as reflected in the literature on urban teachers' shared concerns. DeLorenzo (2019), Fitzpatrick-Harnish (2015), and Frierson-Campbell (2006) among others have written books on urban music education. After 2002, an increasing number of National Association for Music Education conference sessions and journal articles were centered on urban music education (Palkki et al., 2016).

Seminal works defining shared issues in rural music education are more limited, beginning with one volume presenting a vision of music education as offering "something beautiful and fine" to "the one-room school" (McConathy et al., 1933, p. 7, cited in Bates, 2011). Isbell (2005) focused on techniques for rural teaching success. Bates (2016) furthered the profession's rural music education research agenda by cautioning

against "urbanormativity" (p. 170), and promoting benefits of community-oriented perspectives (Bates, 2018). Brook (2013) used case-study methodology to examine rural music students' sense of place. Burkett (2011) studied a community orchestra's PD support for rural teachers; Prest (2020) found similar benefits in a collaboration between an international choral music festival, the Tla'amin First Nation, and a rural district. VanDeusen (2016) examined the positive community influence of small-town music programs. The body of scholarship on rural music teaching, while relatively small, does coalesce around certain special phenomena unique to rural music teaching involving rural teacher working conditions, teacher learning, and the need for PD.

Professional Development Research

Continual learning through PD seems essential to teacher success, and there are numerous ways to approach effective PD. Desimone (2009) identified five critical features of successful PD: (a) content focus, (b) active learning, (c) sustained duration, (d) collective participation, and (e) coherence with curricula, policy, and teachers' knowledge and beliefs. Music teacher PD is most valuable when it is music specific (National Association for Music Education, 2015), reflective, and activates participants' expertise and judgment in sharing insights with collaborators (Bautista et al., 2017). Because music teachers in many settings report feeling isolated, they seek peer networks: formal or informal, large or small, in-person or virtual (Bell-Robertson, 2014). Therefore, peer interactions and collegial mentoring fill crucial PD needs for music teachers.

Researchers have recommended music teacher PD be teacher initiated and differentiated - qualitatively and substantively distinct for music teachers in various contexts and different stages of their careers (Johnson et al., 2019; Koner & Eros, 2019). Differentiating between the PD needs of music teachers is difficult, as the nature of music teaching positions varies between school districts. Even within the same community, teachers' educational contexts can be drastically different. Among the factors that affect music education are teacher-student ratios, the number of courses taught, the classroom setup and location, the size of budget, and the amount of preparation time, along with the program's perceived quality and growth patterns (Major, 2013). A district's geography and location also affect the nature of the music education offered. In this study, we focused on the PD needs of rural music educators, the pursuit of which Burkett (2011) found to be "particularly problematic" (p. 53) due to a limited research base on rural PD decision making. Also, we needed subtle, accurate definitions of rural music education and an assessment of its practitioners' issues.

To address these needs, we focused this study on the self-perceived concerns of music teachers who work in rural teaching environments, be they fringe, distant, or remote. We wanted to learn what PD topics most interested a group of rural general music educators, and what their perceptions were through an online PD course created specifically for them. The purpose of this exploratory study was to identify the self-perceived professional concerns and solutions of rural general music teachers. Our two research questions were

Research Question 1: What pedagogical issues about general music teaching emerged from the PD experience?

Research Question 2: Which of those issues were specific to rural settings?

Mushayikwa and Lubben (2009) studied teachers who participated in self-directed PD as supported by information and communication technology. Like us, the authors found participants from "environments in which teachers work in isolation and with minimum support from the education system" (p. 376). Mushayikwa and Lubben (2009) "constructed meaning from the wording used by the participants to provide succinct descriptions of the teachers' [PD] activities" (p. 377). Similarly, we wanted to use the wording from our participants' online posts in the PD experience to identify their most germane pedagogical issues. We wanted to create a plausible analysis to explain which of those issues seemed *uniquely* connected to rural music teaching and which were relevant to general music teaching anywhere. We sought to identify connections and disconnects between our participants and either their general music context or geographic setting.

While our topic and method were similar to Mushayikwa and Lubben's (2009) grounded theory work with isolated teachers, we stopped short of generating a substantive theory to explain the phenomenon of rural music teaching. Instead, we used qualitative content analysis (QCA), pioneered in nursing education research by Polit and Hungler (1999): a research method for "subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). We drew on the work of Cho and Lee (2014), who finely parsed the differences between grounded theory and QCA, to ensure that our method aligned with QCA principles for systematically deriving meaning from text. This type of analysis focuses on the creation of categories from data, and we detail our categories below in the Findings section.

Participants and Study Design

For this institutional review board–approved study, we recruited six rural teacher-participants for an online PD course consistent with Desimone's (2009) tenets: music focused, participatory, collaborative, longer term, and immediately applicable to classroom practice. Howley and Howley (2005) suggested that rural teachers need "*rural-responsive* professional development . . . [through the] . . . establishment of virtual learning communities that foster collegial dialog among subject matter specialists across the distances that physically separate them" (p. 3), so we created an online PD network to that end. We described it as a free, easy, innovative online PD for rural general music teachers. Via emails, Facebook posts, and contacts in state Music Education Association groups, we recruited teachers from rural fringe, distant, and remote North Carolina and Texas school districts to participate in this study. The following six teachers (pseudonymized here) agreed to participate and could earn 10 hours of continuing education credit or one continuing education unit for completing the course. Four of the teachers (Abby, Dorothy, Emily, and Fran) taught elementary general music in rural-fringe or rural-distant Texas,

while the other two participants (Bethany and Clark) taught K–8 general music and either band or choir in rural-fringe areas of North Carolina. Emily and Dorothy were in their third year of teaching; the others had 20-plus years of experience. Each teacher agreed to participate in our study, although it was not required for the PD course. We had no prior relationship with any participant.

To address our research questions, we developed an online, teacher-led PD course that allowed for asynchronous participant sharing. The course included discussion boards through which teacher-participants read text or viewed video posts. We introduced the three initial discussion topics: "Introduce Yourself," "Unlimited Uses for Limited Time," and "Feeling Lonely?" (Weeks 1–3). Subsequently, Abby introduced "Teaching in Spite of Ancient Textbooks" (Week 4), and Bethany introduced "Integrating Music Without Sacrifices" (Week 5). Weekly discussion expanded as participants responded to each other by adding details, providing suggestions, and assessing the impact of certain ideas on their teaching practices and perceptions. We played limited roles as facilitators, while encouraging participants to discuss topics of most relevance to them. Overall, this teacher-led PD enabled participants to effectively engage in reciprocal learning.

Through this course, delivered via a university learning management system, we were able to examine participant posts and replies to identify topics salient to a group of rural music educators without specifically asking them. We expected the participants to volunteer ideas about broadly based general music issues, and we wanted to determine if they would also discuss issues specifically germane to rural settings. Participants' most relevant experiences as rural general music teachers emerged, which allowed us to develop a multifaceted understanding of their challenges, needs, and solutions while adding diverse perspectives to the existing literature.

In keeping with the exploratory scope and nature of this study, our data source encompassed 83 text and video discussion board posts and replies, amounting to over 13,000 words. Independently, we completed a round of QCA coding by reading complete sets of data for each discussion board to gain a holistic understanding of perceptions and experiences within each topic. Using focused coding, we collaboratively performed cross-topic analysis and noted recurring themes. Additionally, we used participants' own words as codes, peer reviews, and participant checks for trustworthiness and validity (Miles et al., 2014).

Findings and Discussion

Research outcomes of QCA are literature-based interpretations of the meaning of qualitative material, presented by the researchers and sorted into categories or themes that answer the research questions (Cho & Lee, 2014). Our findings fit into two categories: connections and disconnects between our participants and either their classroom music context or geographic setting. As shown in Table 1, presented as Supplemental Material (available online), these themes represented issues and concerns that either applied *broadly* to a general music teaching context or were *unique* to teaching in a rural setting.

Connections

We identified six themes that connected our participants' teaching experiences within either universal general music teaching or to their rural geographic setting. Three themes circumscribed their professional assignments and experiences, relating to general music contexts: *teaching resources*, *student management and evaluation*, and *supportive collegiality*. Three others applied to their geographic setting: *community visibility*, the *centrality of the school in community life*, and *collaboration with other teachers*. All six aspects were shared points of connection among general music teachers; the latter three were positives specific to connections that *rural* music teachers may make.

General Music Context Connections. General music is musically broad and pedagogically diverse; its teachers require a varied repertoire of instructional resources in this wide ranging and multifaceted context. For the first theme, teaching resources, our participants connected on the difficulty of finding the best resources and ways to manage their varied instructional tasks. The choices can be overwhelming: "my Dream PD would be someone coming to my room and showing me how and what to do with everything I have. I literally have closets full of things and sometimes I'm overwhelmed" (Dorothy, May 28).

Bethany struggled to supplement the dated and limited resources in her curriculum, writing, "If your class is like mine, your textbooks are 30 years old, and there are no plans to replace them any time in the near future" (May 19). Fran recycled and repurposed older material while others found resources through social media teacher groups. Dorothy commented that those groups provided ideas, albeit uneven or unrealistic ones.

A second connection involved the "how and why" of classroom management and student evaluation techniques. Participants explored routines, student leadership, and effective preparation. Numerous comments centered on general music classroom management skills. Participants offered solutions for student centered, positive classroom management: routines, expectations, managing student energy and behaviors. Fran explained,

> We have routines for just about everything we do, and since my classes are used to routines, they are able to learn new routines and change up routines as needed. It takes time at the beginning to practice and learn them, but it's worth it . . . [The students] know what to expect and what is expected of them. (May 22)

Similarly, Emily wrote,

> . . . your youngest students should be able to tell anyone (substitutes, principals, parents, etc.) and model how to enter the classroom and say step by step the routines of how the class starts, transitions if any, and how to line up and leave the room. (May 10)

Abby explained how to avoid disruptions: "I select a 'butler' each class period to answer the door and quietly catch up any students who may arrive late" (May 8). Other practical suggestions included repurposing milk crates for both seating and writing

(Abby, May 8), incorporating hula hoops for movement (Dorothy, May 9), distributing recycled neckties to students for partner matching (Dorothy, May 28), and projecting a timer (Clark, May 31).

Other teaching presentation improvement topics were student leadership, managing transitions, and preparation. Bethany noted that teachers can foster student leadership: "We often forget that leaders are not born but made. If we allow our students to take responsibility, coupled with ownership, of a class or routine, the results can be life changing!" (May 21). Fran described transitions, as problematic for her, especially because those involved more movement than she experienced in previous PD. In response, Bethany recommended some logical transitions to distribute and collect musical instruments.

Our participants connected with each other by discussing evaluation of student learning, often a difficult process within the context of general music instruction. One solution Abby (May 8) and Bethany (May 14) suggested was using a musical response to both take attendance and simultaneously evaluate students' singing accuracy.

Emily (May 10) reported using technology in learning centers, with listening, movement, and music literacy activities. Abby described using peer group recorder playing:

> The kids are motivated to stay with their friends and love to be able to test each other. They also learn priceless skills such as peer coaching, reflection, self-evaluation, and perseverance! As an added incentive, the first student each year to be able to play the Black Belt song (Ode to Joy), gets to play it on the morning announcements (May 8).

The teaching techniques constituting this theme were often interrelated and described underlying instructional methods and teaching approaches. They were consistent with active music-making pedagogies widely used by American general music teachers (i.e., Orff-Schulwerk, Kodály, Dalcroze, and music learning theory). Each of these approaches or methods has a philosophical basis that effective teachers understand conceptually and use practically, and our participants articulated many of these precepts.

About the collegiality theme, our participants positively described their interpersonal connections within this online environment as professionally supportive and encouraging. Bethany wrote, "I was motivated to participate in this group to assist other teachers and to be assisted with issues we all face in rural communities. I have been quite impressed by the information shared so freely" (June 6). For her, the virtual interaction seemed as or more valuable than face-to-face meetings: ". . . I have a lot of music teacher friends in other districts. Often, I will see a post of a class activity on Facebook that sparks my interest" (May 19).

In other sharing, participants described the utility and practicality of various teaching tools, basal series, and commercial curricula. Fran (May 20) suggested ways to use even outdated basal series and online resources. Clark described his use of computer software, "It saves time of having to switch CD's, and you can copy, loop, mix tracks together . . . I also use Finale Notepad to write simple music lines to for boom whackers and recorders, it is also free and projectable" (May 31).

Supportive collegiality aligned with Bell-Robertson's (2014) findings; our participants echoed the importance of teamwork and networking to address specific

professional issues. The ways this collaborative PD, with an emphasis on sharing and learning from each other, resonated with our elementary music teacher-participants is consistent with other researchers' findings (Burkett, 2011; Stanley, 2012; Zelenak, 2017). Potter (2021) found participants appreciated other teachers' confirmation of their elementary music classroom management techniques and determined many management concerns occur in rural and urban settings. Likewise, our participants capitalized on learning from others in the community on issues with pedagogical and geographic commonalities.

Rural Geographic Setting Connections. Because of the rural, close-knit nature of their communities, Dorothy, Emily, and Abby wrote they were able to get students to gather to perform nearly once a month: for a town festival, downtown business club meeting, or county association. Dorothy enjoyed the visibility of those functions. She wrote, "last Saturday I did a flash mob with those kids at the local town festival. . . . I even had folks from the Chamber of Commerce respond positively" (May 14). She reported, "I had near 100% attendance at the program and almost 70% at the flash mob on a day with soccer games, dance recitals, and rain in the forecast" (May 28). Abby wrote, "My third graders sing in our town's Christmas festival each year, at the county courthouse steps. We also have had a district-wide summer musical camp" (May 27). Emily described a nearby districts' yearly Main Street parade of recyclable instruments (May 31).

Community visibility reinforces multiple advantages of strong school-community connections (Budge, 2006). Hunt (2009) found a tight-knit supportive network between rural parents and music teachers to be a key factor in support of rural music education programs, even though this connection came at the expense of teacher privacy and autonomy. Similarly, Bates (2011) articulated the personal and professional benefits related to close community connections in rural settings. VanDeusen (2016) found that rural music teachers with "interest in and openness to the community" (p. 63), who created a truly place-based education for students, enjoyed significant benefits from situating their work within "the presence of a music program tradition within the greater community" (p. 63). Adapting and enhancing curricular materials with local or regional content is not limited to rural settings but may be a more common practice there. The ways rural teachers develop place-based curricula to reflect the local geographical setting is an extension of community involvement in schools (Bates, 2018; Spring, 2013). Participants articulated the centrality of their schools in community life, especially when they "embrace[d] the benefits of smallness" (Bates, 2018, p. 7). For example, Fran wrote,

> Our community is very involved in the school. We have a lot of volunteers. When something is happening at the school, the entire town shows up. Our town is so small, so there is not a lot to participate in that is not also related to the school. (May 19)

Similarly, Abby described ways she reaches into the community at large: "Each summer, I bring my 24 ukuleles to the Girl Scout Twilight Camp and do hour long sessions with the various age levels . . . I also teach the music merit badge at a Boy Scout Camp" (May 27).

Theobald and Nachtigal (1995) wrote that rural educators should go beyond field-specific community participation (i.e., music teachers participating in the musical community). Rather, the chief focus should be understanding the "sense of place" unique to their locale, and using that knowledge to "participate in the re-creation of community" (p. 8) as influencers, contributors, and builders who are "contributing to the development of a meaningful identity" for the school, town, or area. The teachers in our study demonstrated their direct community involvement by offering nearby children and their families multiple opportunities—even outside the bounds of the school day or school year—for investment in community life, practice, and rituals.

In a third theme, the participants reported how well they worked with other teachers. Emily (May 10) recognized the importance of her elective and specialist colleagues providing assistance with preconcert rehearsals. Fran highlighted the necessity of building relationships. She wrote,

> The principal . . . asked me to please have lunch in the lounge and to please not stay to myself in my room like the previous music teacher did. I'm so glad they made the effort to make me feel welcome. Having connections with the teachers keeps me from feeling lonely . . . I'm fortunate that this school values me and the music program. We all help each other out however we can (May 19).

Several teachers said they enjoyed the proximity to other music educators and the ease in traveling across grade levels: "the awesome middle school band director has come over several times to meet with my fifth graders . . . to do an instrument fair in an effort to get more kids signed up for band, and that was tremendous" (Dorothy, May 14). Abby reported that a high school band director provided percussion clinics for some of her classes. Itinerant teacher Clark described his collegial relationships in terms of both distance and connection:

> I was based at one school for only 3 years. I think of the 31 years [in my teaching experience] the only real time I felt a solid part of the faculty was those 3 years . . . the view of the faculty actually changed, and they saw I was able to be a big help to the school. (May 31)

Teacher collaborations and connections can support mutual growth (Zelenak, 2017). Especially for music teachers, efforts to build collegial bridges and avoid professional isolation are important for multiple reasons (Spruce et al., 2020). For our participants, however, collaborations and collegiality did not extend to substantive curricular connections. Instead, the collaboration was focused on practical needs and building professional relationships, including important vertical alignment with middle and high school music programs.

Disconnects

Three overarching themes illustrated participants' sense of disconnection to other general music teachers (i.e., *professional isolation* and *lack of meaningful interdisciplinary teaching*) and their geographic setting (i.e., *lack of musical exposure*). While the

phenomenon of music teacher isolation is well-documented (e.g., Spruce et al., 2020), it is not unique to rural music teaching settings. Similarly, participants' dissatisfaction with limited opportunities for high-quality interdisciplinary teaching or arts integration has been echoed by music teachers in nonrural settings. One theme we did ascribe to the nature of rural teaching was the paucity of varied musical performances in their communities, and the lack of out-of-school musical opportunities for their students such as private lessons, music stores, or elite performing groups (e.g., youth choirs or symphonies).

General Music Context Disconnects. Despite finding ways to work with other teachers, our participants encountered an absence of true district-level collaboration: "It's hard to connect with grade level teachers because we have so little in common" (Dorothy, May 28). Itinerancy heightened their professional isolation, but this is not solely a rural problem as itinerant music teacher assignments are common everywhere. As Clark wrote,

> I have felt for almost all of my music career that I am a "carnival teacher" that comes in, does their job, then it is wisk [sic] away to my other school and do the same thing there. . . . I am just a break/planning period for the classroom teachers. . . . It is actually lonely in a way, but I have come to not expect much more. (May 31)

Abby also described the literal and figurative isolation of her class:

> I do get lonely. Not only am I the only fine arts teacher on my campus, but to compound the isolation, my room is separated in its own wing along with the gym. The teachers drop their kids off at the end of the hallway and wave to me from afar. (May 27)

Perhaps enjoying some degree of autonomy, Bethany said she sought input from teachers in other districts: ". . . even though I am not receiving as much in terms of intellectual [sic] music teaching contact, I realize that I am more often alone than lonely" (May 19).

Our participants could not make meaningful interdisciplinary connections with nonmusic colleagues. They were therefore dissatisfied with the integration of music throughout their schools. When they did initiate contact with elementary grade-level teachers, any cross-curricular initiatives were accidental and superficial. Meaningful interdisciplinary connections are difficult to establish, even when teachers are prepared to work without collaborators as "singletons" with an "interdisciplinary mindset" (Barrett & Veblen, 2018, p. 147).

In theory, smaller and/or rural schools might more easily accomplish the necessary communication to realize more ideal arts integration, as demonstrated by LaGarry and Richard (2018). They took a well-designed, purposeful approach to interdisciplinary teaching, consistent with Barrett and Veblen's (2018) recommendation to be prepared for a high level of adaptation and modification when integrating music with other disciplines. Although integrated arts education projects in rural settings could provide

for innovative curricular change, we did not observe that pedagogical approach in our study.

Rural Geographic Setting Disconnects. Our participants reported their communities suffered from a lack of exposure to musical events, particularly live performances that might be found in suburban or urban areas. The cost and logistics of bringing groups to their schools, or making a concert field-trip, were overwhelming and prohibitive: "There are some state-wide opportunities to help fund fine arts speakers and visitors, but the paperwork is lengthy and labor-intensive and it's still not cheap" (Dorothy, May 14). Emily wrote,

> This year I have asked 10 different places and groups if there was a way for us to come see them or a way for them to come and present to us. All had fell through and 3 were over $1500 which was way too much for my school and for me to afford. . . . I would have liked to take my group to go and perform for a field trip event but it seems nearly impossible . . . without traveling across the state and making it expensive . . . I feel so lost with finding opportunities. (May 20)

Online resources may partially fill the void: "Being in a very small town does limit what the students are exposed to. I show them various examples on YouTube, but it's not the same as seeing things live" (Fran, May 19). Participants reported that performing arts organizations did not care or were simply unavailable. Traveling performances were not geared toward the younger general music audience: ". . . companies and some musical venues don't see any value in bringing such young children to them or present in front of them" (Emily, May 31). Dorothy echoed this sentiment: "I think where I struggle is trying to provide different types of experiences for my kids" (May 14). This confirms Hunt's (2009) findings that teachers perceive community musical resources teaching to be more available in nonrural areas.

Conclusion and Implications

Our participants benefited from a trove of collective general music teaching wisdom and insights during this online PD course. The prominence of the intangible emotional benefit of connecting with others in similar rural teaching situations was consistent with other online PD communities in which personal connections were vitally important (Bell-Robertson, 2014). Despite the fact that this PD was organized for and advertised to rural music teachers, much discussion pertaining to elementary music teaching transcended location. The PD provided a collegial opportunity for music teachers sharing geographic and professional similarities. The teacher-led, teacher-initiated topics of the discussion boards were what Burkett (2011) advocated for rural music teachers, but that would seem to apply broadly: PD "oriented toward relevant and useful topics and experiences that spark an inquisitiveness and continuing curiosity of learning and self-development in teachers, and to counteract the complacency that may occur from being in a fixed, isolated career path" (p. 63).

To address the frustration our participants reported about the lack of community musical resources, we suggest leveraging atypical but effective resources. For rural music teachers, intentional relationship building with students, parents, administrators, and community plays a major role in the success of programs (VanDeusen, 2016). Causby (2019) recommended deploying a larger circle of relationships to consider new ensembles, music courses, and performances that are more befitting a particular location, student culture, and surrounding group of residents. We assert that a broader definition of "relationship-building" might result in rural classroom teachers envisioning "musical resources" in a more creative, encompassing way; what is a good musical resource in their rural town might look quite different than what they imagine happens in urban and suburban locales. By doing so, we avoid "urbanormativity" (Bates, 2016, p. 170), or the belief that the norms of cultural excellence can only be set in urban locales. Instead, we recommend using Hunt's (2009) Developing Contextual Awareness model for teachers as a tool, which allows teachers in urban and rural environments, particularly, to "focus on advantages and identify challenges that might become opportunities" (p. 45). This model can be used with preservice teachers as well.

In addition to the need for teachers to reach out to new constituencies, other stakeholders such as community arts organizations should reach out to them (LaGarry & Richard, 2018). We recommend that performing groups developing audiences and educational programming consider expansion into rural areas. This reinforces Burkett's (2011) finding that when music teachers work in areas away from universities and state arts agencies it is "vitally important" (p. 63) for local arts institutions to support them.

No participants expressed a desire to leave rural settings, despite the occasional isolation and lack of musical resources. As Bates (2011) wrote, they may feel "called" to work where they do (p. 124). Also, contrary to LaGarry and Richard's findings (2018), and despite Bethany initiating a discussion board on the topic, participants did not report success with interdisciplinary teaching projects. This inconsistency may stem from a lack of prerequisite conditions for this kind of teaching (Barrett & Veblen, 2018).

Further research is necessary to continue to develop insights about what it means to be a rural music teacher. While some researchers have delineated finer shades of rurality (White & Corbett, 2014) there is still a lack of consistency, which introduces confusion and inhibits generalizability to other settings (Hawley et al., 2016). Music education researchers need to address this ambiguity by attending to nuances of context and settings in future research, perhaps going beyond the large governmental agency definitions.

Implications for Music Teacher Educators

This exploratory project offers music teacher educators an option for online, focused, and flexible teacher-led PD for music teachers in distant, remote, and rural locales. Given the need for virtual networks during the COVID-19 global pandemic, our project points to the potential for professional music teaching organizations to implement

larger scale models for rural teachers and demonstrates the importance of reaching this often-neglected subgroup of teachers throughout the country. Another implication of this study is that both veteran and novice music teachers benefitted from enhanced emotional support via our online community, expanding previous research findings (Bell-Robertson, 2014).

While more discussions pertained to participants' general music teaching than to their geographic setting, we did document the influence of rurality on participants' teaching perceptions and practices in numerous, mostly positive ways. We recommend music teacher educators intentionally identify and highlight rural place-based pedagogy within teacher preparation courses to avoid urbanormative, exclusionary assumptions. We also recommend a reexamination of our fieldwork and student teaching placements to explore how rural communities can be better represented. Virtual observations can eliminate transportation and distance hurdles that might otherwise make visiting rural music classes difficult for university students.

Despite the inherent limitations of an exploratory study, this investigation contributes to a detailed understanding of rural music teachers' needs, advantages, and challenges that will help our profession support this large, disparate group of educators. Especially with the increase in online PD for all teachers, we plan to expand our research and provide more teacher-initiated PD for rural music teachers in the future. Everywhere is indeed somewhere, and research-based definitions often do not provide the nuanced acknowledgement of unique, rural identities. Our next steps include a study to give voice to self-identified rural music teachers in an effort to "get rural right" (Hawley et al., 2016, p. 9).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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