

## Challenges and Place-Based Solutions in Rural Music Education: A UBC Study Sponsored by the Rix Family Foundation

### Introduction

I would like to thank Linda Farr Darling, the Eleanor Rix Professor of Rural Teacher Education for the opportunity to complete this study as her research assistant.

As a BC rural music educator who taught in a Grade 5-12 school in a village of 1200 people for 16 years, I often wondered what was going on musically in other small schools in small communities across British Columbia and beyond. Although I had some communication with others in similar situations, I did not have an overall impression, nor was I aware of any systematic study that outlined common issues and unique solutions that music educators, administrators, and interested community members could use as a resource.

When I started my PhD in Curriculum and Pedagogy in September, I was very happy to be given the opportunity to explore this area. This past fall, I asked the superintendents of 40 rural school districts if they would be interested in completing a survey about the state of music education in their districts. I also asked rural music educators at the BC Music Educators Conference held in October to fill out a complementary survey about their own personal experience teaching music in a rural setting. I received completed surveys from 25 of the 40 school districts. Of those, 18 agreed to an in-depth interview for a further study. Thirteen superintendents, directors of instruction, music coordinators, school administrators, and practicing music teachers have been interviewed to date.

I formulated the questions for this study from the information garnered from the surveys and this spring I conducted the interviews, asking questions concerning teacher preparation, structural/administrative issues, and school/community musical interactions. Today, I'm presenting my initial findings regarding the most pressing issues in the delivery of music instruction in rural settings and some place-based solutions to these shared challenges in the funding, staffing, and scheduling of music in the day-to-day curriculum. I use the word 'solution' lightly; often it means 'being as innovative as possible to alleviate *some* of the obstacles that exist' as opposed to truly resolving problems in the delivery of music education in rural areas. These initial findings are first impressions and will require far deeper scrutiny.

Some but not all of the following issues are related to *declining enrollment* due to lost resource sector jobs in forestry, fishing, mining, and energy in the past 10 years. Declining enrollment has had an enormous impact on school district funding. However, many districts see a projected end in sight, citing 2012-2016 as the turn around period as new business enterprises start up and young children already in the community enter the school system.

Issue #1 - Elementary generalist teachers expected to teach music with minimal access to ongoing music professional development

Ten of thirteen districts reported that generalist teachers are expected to teach music to their classes, yet the majority of generalist teachers feel unprepared to do so because they have completed only one music education course as part of their teacher education program. For many of the new teachers, it is the only exposure to music instruction they have ever had. In most districts, there are no opportunities for music professional development; teachers must attend professional development in Vancouver during summer months or at a music teachers conference in order to enhance their musical knowledge. Elementary teachers must develop expertise in many subject areas and may not be willing to spend an entire summer acquiring basic musicianship skills they can share with their students. One consequence is that teachers may attempt to include some music in the classroom by practicing songs for a Christmas concert, for example, but will focus on the other fine arts during the rest of the year because they feel more competent in these areas. **Most rural elementary age students do not receive sequential music instruction in their formative years and do not achieve musical literacy in all its forms - playing an instrument, singing in parts, composing, improvising, and reading music.**

#### Place-based Solutions

One school district has created a .125 music coordinator position for their one elementary music specialist to work with generalist elementary teachers who desire to become more competent at delivering music instruction. The coordinator is able to give traditional pro-d and to go into the classroom for an eight week period to demonstrate effective music education techniques. School districts either hire BC trained elementary teachers with a musical background or recruit from out of province, especially from Alberta where elementary teacher training has a larger music education component.

#### Issue #2 - Teacher Recruitment

In school districts consisting of one larger city with a population of 20,000 - 70,000 and several smaller towns and villages, teachers who teach in the smaller centres live in the city, commute to their schools, and find another position where they live as soon as possible (usually within three years). Teachers who do not live in the communities where they teach may not be able to commit to as many extra-curricular opportunities and, because they may be more transient, cannot develop music programs over time.

School districts with no major centres have even greater difficulty in recruiting teachers who are committed to staying in the community long enough to develop a comprehensive music program. They report that **not enough music educators are graduating and of those who do, not many wish to live in rural areas, especially if they have always lived in an urban setting.**

#### Place-based Solutions

Some school districts post full time jobs (music plus one more subject) rather than a part-time music position in order to attract music teachers to their district. They scout for music specialists capable of teaching another subject.

School districts in very remote areas hire community people who have musical knowledge but are not certified educators to give their students some musical instruction.

### Issue #3 - Structural Impediments

Systemic issues arising from declining enrollment and subsequent less funding are endemic. These include timetabling, transportation, and fewer elective choices. Smaller secondary schools find it difficult to offer linear music classes, especially if they are cross-graded, so many schools offer either semestered music classes in the timetable or linear classes out of the timetable. Semestered classes do not enable students to develop the consistent kinesthetic skills that are required for musicianship, and linear, out of timetable classes exclude those students who rely on bussing (up to two hours each way) to attend school. More academic courses conflict with elective offerings because financial restraints have shrunk scheduling options.

Some school districts have moved to a middle school structure. These schools offer Explorations courses that are an introduction to a wide selection of electives but do not enable students to acquire in depth musical knowledge or sufficient technical skills to play an instrument competently. Some middle schools that offer Explorations also offer out-of-timetable large ensemble courses, but this model (also known as the Coquitlam model because it originates from that school district) does not take into account that in rural school districts many students rely on bussing for transportation.

**Students have fewer choices and they are often deterred from making those choices because the scheduling of their academic subjects conflicts with the music classes they would like, because music is offered out of the timetable and they do not have alternate transportation, and because schools only offer introductory short-term music courses.**

### Place-based Solutions

When scheduling conflicts arise, students who take an academic class are allowed to attend only occasionally the music class that is scheduled at the same time. However, they must be reliable students who will practice, know their parts, and complete assignments independently.

Music teachers work over a long period of time and eventually, the music program is highly valued by the students, school and community. Administrators timetable music classes first and academic subjects next to minimize conflicts.

Teachers develop other music classes like Music Composition and Technology that don't require kinesthetic skills, or provide introductory world music or guitar courses designed to encourage independent interest in music and that don't require large ensemble rehearsals to succeed. These courses can be semestered.

Schools offer a large ensemble class in first semester in the timetable and a locally developed large ensemble course held out of the timetable in the second semester (that is funded by the district) for those who wish to attend festivals and continue with their musical skill development.

### Issue #4 - Community Connections

Rural communities have unique qualities, geographies, and social makeup that affect their relationships with their local schools. Theobald (1997), in *Teaching the Commons* states, “[rural] schools are profoundly affected by the circumstances that affect their communities” (p. 53).<sup>1</sup> Place-based education theory suggests that rural schools develop partnerships with the community to foster and validate local understanding and to utilize to advantage unique local circumstances to educate youth and to contribute back to the community.

#### Place-based Solutions/Connections

European musical traditions have functions and meanings that may be different from other musical traditions. In order to incorporate First Nations musical traditions, teachers ask elders to come into their classrooms to explain spiritual aspects of some First Nations music. Schools and teachers build trust with individual First Nations families and communities so that these families are willing to share songs, especially those that are privately owned and denote status. Some university teacher education programs in other provinces have a required aboriginal perspectives course that teach traditional bone games as well as sensitivity to First Nations ways of knowing. Some school districts are working on developing a fine arts policy to ensure that all students in all their schools have access to music education.

Some communities are developing official community plans that include an ‘arts in schools’ component.

Community bands and professional orchestras have informal and formal programs to help music students develop musicianship skills that complement school music teacher instruction. Members of these organizations go into the schools to mentor students. Schools actively recruit volunteers in the community who have musical knowledge to share their expertise in some capacity with students.

Communities have developed 1) foundations and non-profit societies to support music education programs when they are cut, 2) music festivals and community spaces to provide students opportunities to perform individually, as a group, and with new people and to build audience capacity (room for not only parents but also extended family and friends). Sometimes, these festivals and spaces are initiated by the school district, sometimes by the community, and sometimes as genuine, official partnerships. These events are often highlights of the year for the community.

Vancouver music organizations that have outreach education programs like Vancouver Opera are striving to developing technological links to bring these outreach programs to distant communities that have sufficient technology infrastructure.

#### Other Overarching Themes

Several interviewees felt that education is not equitable in rural areas despite receiving more ‘per student’ funding than urban areas.

Districts that are led by senior administrators who value music strive to find solutions to deliver some music instruction despite financial constraints.

Schools that have passionate music teachers who are committed to the community tend to have more vibrant music programs.

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<sup>1</sup> Theobald, Paul. (1997). *Teaching the commons: Place, pride and the renewal of community*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.

Place is important and schools reflect what the community deems is important.

Technological innovations related to the internet do not work in all rural settings because some rural communities don't have enough band width or even the stable telephone connections urban areas take for granted.

Student retention in remote communities is linked to elective choices and when those choices are limited because of budgetary restraints, students sometimes lose interest in school and drop out.

#### Future Directions

Over the next few months, I will complete the remaining interviews and create transcriptions of all conversations before examining all data more deeply. I hope to follow leads that some interviewees suggested to garner greater understanding of the complexities of rural music education in the context of place. Finally, I will write an article on my analysis of all the information for publication.