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Factors Affecting Rural Music Educators' Career Decisions

The purpose of this study was to examine factors that may influence the projected career plans of music teachers in rural areas. Survey participants ($N = 115$) in Wyoming completed a questionnaire designed to elicit responses about multiple factors and projected career plans in one year and in five years. The vast majority of participants planned to remain in their jobs the following year, and 65% of participants planned to stay in their jobs five years in the future. However, 21.4% of participants planned to migrate to different teaching jobs in five years and 12.1% planned to leave the profession altogether. The most impactful variables for migration or attrition in five years were satisfaction with non-instructional duties, teaching load, level of faculty influence, teacher autonomy, opportunities for collaboration, and recognition for teachers' work. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

Keywords: career decisions; music teacher attrition; music teacher retention; rural music education; rural music educators

Introduction

Issues of teacher attrition, retention, and career choice are closely examined facets of the general education research literature because they are central to the well-being of the profession (Bernhard, 2007; Boyd et al., 2011; Guarino et al., 2006). These issues can be urgent and informative to educational stakeholders as they attempt to address teacher shortages and related problems (Marvel et al., 2006; Sutchter et al., 2016). Researchers have attempted to collect meaningful data in a multitude of ways, including following reported teacher attrition as well as teachers' intended career paths. As such, researchers using such methods have examined the effectiveness of using teachers' career intentions and have found that

teacher career intentions are reliable predictors of actual career plans (Vandenberg & Barnes-Nelson, 1999). In music education specifically, researchers have been interested in these issues (Boyd et al., 2011; Hancock, 2008; Matthews & Koner, 2017; Russell, 2008, 2012; Scheib, 2004) and have made them central to several professional endeavors and professional gatherings. For example, the Society for Music Teacher Education (SMTE) created an Area of Strategic Planning and Action (ASPA) focused on teacher attrition. The often unique nature of music educators' work makes them a reasonable focus of additional and connected research into teacher attrition, migration, and career paths.

Consequently, music education researchers have examined career path issues and have formed a relatively detailed profile of inservice music educators. Music educators have cited parental and administrative support as well as student success as contributors to their job satisfaction (Heston et al., 1996). Unfortunately, music educators have previously reported lower levels of job satisfaction when unruly student behavior is present (Lander et al., 2008) and when they perceive insufficient administrative support (Krueger, 2000). Regarding their day-to-day teaching, music educators are more likely to teach in multiple buildings within a school district than their colleagues (Gardner, 2010) and have reported troubling feelings of isolation (McLain, 2005; Robison, 2017; Sindberg & Lipscomb, 2005). One heartening trend in the literature is the growing number of studies addressing the needs of elementary general music (EGM) teachers who usually entered their university programs expecting to teach in secondary ensemble contexts (Rickels et al, 2013), but find themselves in the sometimes more plentiful EGM settings (Corfield-Adams, 2012; Groulx, 2015; Kuebel, 2017, 2019; Robinson, 2010; Salvador & Corbett, 2016; Shouldice, 2013, 2017).

According to the 2010 U.S. Census (n.d.), almost 60 million people, or about 19 percent of the population, lived in rural areas of the United States. Music education in rural areas, where one teacher can be both the elementary and secondary teacher concurrently, is an emergent facet of the literature (e.g., Bates, 2011a, 2011b, 2013; Hopkins, 2019; Isbell, 2005; Spring, 2014). The relatively few number of researchers focused on this area employ social class theory, pragmatism, and "rural ideals" (Bates, 2013), often through narrative inquiry methodologies. A ubiquitous theme in this research is that the success of a music program is largely dependent on the success and efforts of the rural music teacher. For example, "It All Depends on You: A Rural Music Educator Who Won't Quit" (Wilcox, 2005) is the title of a practitioner article containing a portrait of a music teaching situation in rural Nebraska. Teacher attrition in rural areas can be devastating to affected communities and it is currently a gap in the music education literature.

Despite a growing number of studies about music educators' career plans, as well as those about rural music education, we found no published studies about music educators' career plans in rural areas specifically, which indicates a need for an initial examination of these educators. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine factors that may influence the projected career plans of music teachers in rural areas (i.e., their current intentions). Based on previous research (Luekens et al., 2004; Russell, 2008), we wished to identify characteristics of projected *stayers* (people who indicate they will stay in their positions), *movers* (people who indicate they will stay in the profession but teach elsewhere), and *leavers* (those who intend to leave the profession). As a secondary purpose, we endeavored to identify what roles music teachers may take outside of PK–12 programs to examine their possible effects on intended career paths. More specifically, we sought to answer these research questions:

1. What are the demographic data for in-service music educators in Wyoming, a rural, Western state?
2. What are participants' reported levels of job satisfaction, career commitment, and future career decisions?
3. Based on a one-year projection, to what extent can rural music teachers be accurately classified as *stayers*, *movers*, or *leavers*?
4. Based on a five-year projection, to what extent can rural music teachers be accurately classified as *stayers*, *movers*, or *leavers*?

Method

Instrument

To answer the above research questions, we employed the Music Educator Career Questionnaire (MECQ), which is the identical instrument from previous studies examining the career plans of string music educators and secondary educators (Russell, 2008, 2012). In each of these studies, Russell found that the subscales had high internal consistency (e.g., Cronbach's $\alpha = .67 - .88$). Items were based on previously published research exploring teacher career decisions (e.g. Hagedorn, 2000; Scafidi et al., 2007; Shoho & Martin, 1999). The questionnaire consisted of nine general sections: teacher demographics, job satisfaction, student issues, psychological issues, subject importance, music education philosophy, job market, teacher quality, and projected career plans. The demographics section included questions about the participants' race, self-identified gender, age,

years of teaching experience, marital status, number of children, socio-economic status growing up, and undergraduate grade point average. The majority of items utilized Likert-type scales, while many of the demographic and career plan items were open ended or ipsative. Anchors for the Likert-type scales were 1 = *very dissatisfied* to 4 = *very satisfied*.

Data Collection

We employed universal sampling of all public school music educators in Wyoming. Through the state music education association listserv, we e-mailed the MECQ to 286 educators and received 115 completed questionnaires, resulting in a 40% response rate, which is above the typical response rate for electronic surveys (i.e., Shih & Fan, 2008). We collected data over the course of one month.

Participants

Participants were music educators in Wyoming ($N = 115$). The largest subset of participants taught at the elementary level (48%), with the second highest percentage teaching in high school (25%), and a high number of participants in mixed level settings (14%) with the remaining in middle school or junior high settings (12.50%). General music was the highest reported primary teaching genre (51%), followed by band (29%), choir (17%), and strings (4%). Most participants were married (71%), while 21% were single and fewer were divorced (8%). The majority of participants (99%) were certified to teach music and obtained certification through a four-year undergraduate program in music education (89%). These participants were highly representative of the music educators in the population state with respect to teaching level and genre (Hopkins, 2019).

Data Analysis

In order to answer our research questions, we employed SPSS v. 26 to first describe the statistics regarding participants' satisfaction with multiple aspects of their positions as well as their psychology regarding teaching (i.e., commitment). Following this, we conducted a discriminant analysis of the data to see if the variables collected could predict group memberships (i.e., *stayers*, *movers*, *leavers*). Discriminant analysis is a multivariate statistical technique for investigating the relationship among several independent variables and a nominal dependent variable (Goodstein, 1987), in this instance, whether or not a participant indicated that they intended to be a *stayer*, *mover*, or *leaver*. Because the primary purpose

of this study was to determine what factors might cause rural teachers to join the groups of stayers, movers, or leavers, discriminant analysis is an appropriate statistical tool. We undertook several steps to meet the assumptions of discriminant analysis. For example, we ensured that the number of cases was adequate given the number of predictor variables (Poulsen & French, n.d.). We did not need to exclude any variable that lacked normality as violations of this assumption are not fatal to discriminant analysis as long as the issue is with skewness rather than outliers (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996). The next assumption of discriminant analysis is homogeneity of variances and covariances. Homogeneity of variance assumes that the amount of variability in each group is relatively equal (Salkind, 2004). We tested for homogeneity for each variable and homoscedasticity was checked using Box's M test during the discriminant analyses. The final assumption for discriminant analysis is non-multicollinearity. Non-multicollinearity assumes that no two independent variables are highly correlated as was the case in our analysis.

In order to conduct the discriminant analyses, we built the model via a series of bivariate analyses to see which variables should be included in the discriminant analyses, keeping in mind that these bivariate analyses were not to be used for interpretation or discussion. We elected to employ a descriptive discriminant analysis as we had the group self-identification from participants and we wanted to assess how well the data collected could classify group membership. Moreover, we used this statistical procedure because discriminant analysis partitions the independent variables thus removing any issue of intercorrelation (Huberty & Olejnik, 2006).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Participants' answers to questions involving Likert-type scales revealed overall satisfaction with teaching assignments, relationships with colleagues, community members, and administrators, and teaching loads, but general dissatisfaction with the local, state, and federal mandates that dictate policy in their classrooms. The vast majority of participants reported being very committed (65.79%) or committed (26.32%) to being a music teacher ($M = 3.57$, $SD = .66$), and assessed themselves as effective (56.14%) or very effective (38.60%) at their jobs ($M = 3.33$, $SD = .57$) despite reports of feeling somewhat isolated (39.47%), isolated (22.81%) or very isolated (18.42%) ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.00$). Most participants thought of themselves as equal parts musician and teacher (54.87%), but 38.94% of participants described themselves as mostly a teacher and somewhat a musi-

cian. Complete results involving participants' satisfaction of Likert-type scale answers can be found in Table 1.

Table 1
Results from Questions Regarding Satisfaction

How Satisfied are You With...	Mean	SD
Your teaching assignment?	3.25	0.70
Your relationships with colleagues in your school?	3.10	0.67
Your relationship with parents in your community?	3.09	0.66
Your relationship with the administration in your school?	3.03	0.75
Your teaching load?	2.99	0.72
The level of community support at your school?	2.96	0.77
Your non-instructional duties?	2.93	0.63
The level of autonomy afforded to teachers in your school?	2.90	0.77
The level of administrative support at your school?	2.89	0.78
Student quality or achievement at your school?	2.75	0.76
The opportunities for collaboration with other faculty members?	2.68	0.83
The recognition you receive for your work?	2.68	0.81
Student discipline in your school?	2.63	0.77
Student motivation at your school?	2.55	0.78
Your opportunities to advance within education?	2.53	0.74
The level of faculty influence on decisions made in your school?	2.52	0.86
The local, state, and federal mandates that dictate policy in your classroom?	2.31	0.68
Local opportunities to find a higher paying job outside of education?	2.07	0.78

Note. 1 = very dissatisfied, 2 = dissatisfied, 3 = satisfied, 4 = very satisfied

Discriminant Analysis

Discriminant Analysis of One Year Plans. Due to a lack of variance in response to the short-term career plans (i.e., the vast majority of participants, 89.20%, planned to remain in the profession in their current position), we were unable to conduct further analyses on this outcome beyond the descriptive findings. Therefore, we were unable to answer research question #3 with the data collected.

Discriminant Analysis of Five Year Plans. We conducted a multiple predictive discriminant analysis to determine which variables, if any, could be used to classify participants as either *stayers*, *movers*, or *leavers* as projected for year five. The grouping variable for this analysis was the predicted career decision of the participants for five years in the future (stay, migrate, or leave). Response (predictor) variables included satisfaction with non-instructional duties, teaching load, level of faculty influence, teacher autonomy, opportunities for collaboration, and recognition for their work. Additionally, we included participants' reported commitment to being a music teacher, reported enjoyment of being a music teacher, reported isolation experienced as a music teacher, years of teaching (we did not

include age as it was highly correlated with years of teaching), and perceived similarity of philosophy with administrators of participants.

The Box's M test was not significant (Box's M = 200.53, $p = .129$) indicating that group variance was equivalent and the assumption of homogeneity of covariance was met (Russell, 2018). In Table 2, we depict year five bivariate tests for variables included in the analysis.

Table 2
Bivariate Analyses for Model Building

Item	F	Sig
Non-Instructional Duties	7.496	.001
Teaching Load	2.441	.092
Faculty Influence on Decisions	6.217	.003
Level of Autonomy	4.613	.012
Collaboration Opportunities	4.875	.009
Commitment to Teaching	3.972	.022
Level of Isolation	6.094	.003
Level of Enjoyment	4.489	.013
Satisfaction with Recognition	7.550	.001
Similar Philosophy to Administration	10.352	.000
How Many Years Teaching	6.165	.003

Two different functions were produced by this discriminant analysis. The eigenvalue for Function 1 was .429 explaining 60.5% of variance. The eigenvalue for the second function was .280 explaining an additional, orthogonal 39.5% of variance. The cumulative variance explained by both functions was 100%. The Wilks' lambda for function one was significant (Wilks' lambda = .547, $df = 22$, $p = <.001$) as well as for the second function (Wilks' lambda = .781, $df = 10$, $p = .006$). We examined the structure coefficients for each function in order to assign a label to the dimension that a function measures. For clarity, the meta-variable corresponding to Function 1 focuses on work-place issues that music educators may face while Function 2 focuses on more personal or psychological phenomena experienced by rural music educators.

The year five discriminant analysis model was able to correctly classify 67.3% of cases. This model was able to classify *stayers* accurately 65.0% of the time, *movers* 64.3% of the time, and *leavers* 72.7% of the time, suggesting that although leavers are more easily classified than movers or stayers, these predictor variables can be used to predict teacher career plans only slightly more accurately than chance (i.e., 33.3%) (See Table 3).

Table 3
Classification Results: Year Five

Data Type	Grouping Variable	Predicted Group Membership			
		Stayer	Mover	Leaver	Total
Count	Stayers	39	8	13	60
	Movers	3	9	2	14
	Leavers	4	5	24	33
	Ungrouped	0	0	1	1
Percent	Stayers	65.0	13.3	21.7	100
	Movers	21.4	64.3	14.3	100
	Leavers	12.1	15.2	72.7	100
	Ungrouped	0.0	0.0	0.0	0

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine factors that may influence the projected career plans of music teachers in rural areas. More specifically, we wished to identify characteristics of projected *stayers*, *movers*, and *leavers* with the secondary purpose of identifying what roles these music educators may take outside of PK–12 programs and their possible effects on intended career paths. One possible limitation of this design may be volunteer bias in which there may have been differences between the participants and the people who did not participate, although this is less of a threat when surveying a targeted or purposive population (Fowler, 2013). Based on these findings, rural music educators are likely to focus their career decision processes on issues of teaching load, non-instructional duties, levels of faculty influence in their schools, recognition for their work, levels of isolation, and opportunities for collaboration. These findings both contradict and corroborate those of previous researchers concomitantly, which lends credence to the need to study rural music educators further. For example, these findings are in contrast with those of a national survey of music educators using the same research instrument, in which the major issues of teacher migration and attrition were student race and teacher mentorship (Robison & Russell, 2021). Such a discrepancy is logical based on the lack of racial diversity in the state surveyed (U.S. Census, 2020). Furthermore, the vast majority of participants attained licensure from the same institution (preservice music teachers in this state have one in-state university option), which could explain a more uniform musical and pedagogical culture including philosophy among initial job seekers and early career teachers, thereby making teaching loads and responsibilities ripe for comparison across districts. However, these findings corroborate those of some previous researchers who studied rural music educators specifically. Both the isolation variable and its converse variable about opportunities to collaborate were emergent in this study,

just as those points were central in other studies with rural participants (Bates, 2011a, 2011b, 2013; Isbell, 2005; Spring, 2014; Wilcox, 2005). Lastly, our finding that recognition for one's work significantly affects attrition is tangible evidence of Bates' (2011a) recommendations almost a decade earlier, "We could validate rural music teachers by inviting them to the university to speak to our students about teaching in rural schools and to show our honest acknowledgment and appreciation for what they do" (p. 96).

Implications for Practice

We identify several implications for practice for in-service music educators based on these findings, most of which can be implemented by providing resources for rural music educators to attend annual state music education conferences. These gatherings in the US are typical in all 50 states, but the rural West has both geographic and financial barriers to their music teachers attending them. Rural music educators' administrators may not allow the time nor funding for travel to these conferences (Hopkins, 2019), perhaps because many music teachers have dual responsibilities teaching in other subjects. Denying rural music educators the opportunity to attend yearly professional development conferences is unwise in our view, because experienced music teachers are often the most competent people to understand the unique struggles of other music teachers and help them. As Bates (2013) concluded "...quality music education, from the agrarian perspective, must grow from the ground up—through ongoing and frequent needs—fulfilling interactions between people in local places" (p. 86). Specific to addressing findings in this study, the recognition for their work concern can be mitigated through regional awards at these conferences, including those specifically for new or young teachers. The reaffirming commitment to the profession, sharing enjoyment, and fighting isolation concerns can be mitigated through open-ended or democratically structured support sessions and their accompanying social events at these state conferences for professional development and/or graduate education credit.

We recommend consideration of several implications for preservice music teachers who are likely to teach in rural areas and the music teacher educators who prepare them. First, such preservice teachers would be wise to seek practica or student teaching opportunities in rural settings to gain experience with their practical realities and better align their expectations for initial employment. Similarly, methods courses could include facets of the rural experience, such as foci on accessibility for students, remote learning, seeking professional development once in the field, and teaching in multi-grade level spaces, as described in previous literature (Bates, 2011a; Spring, 2014). Lastly, given the level of dissatisfaction participants in this

study faced with policies that affect them, a reasonable preparation for teaching in rural settings is helpful insight, information, or encouragement about engaging in local politics that affect education, such as explanations of how school boards function, the role of unions, and any political committees that help enact change. Though music education methods classes cannot also be exhaustive civics classes, a little knowledge about policy and how to affect it would be useful to help shape policies that guide “rurally relevant teaching” (Spring, 2014, p. 276).

Limitations and Further Research

Based on these findings, we have several recommendations for further research into rural music educators and their career decisions, the first of which is a parsing of the term “rural music educator” itself. In preparation for this study, we became more familiar with how broad this term is currently. The federal government defines a rural population as “any population, housing, or territory not in an urban area” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020), which in the eyes of federal stakeholders combines the unique issues of rural music educators in states like Ohio, Montana, Texas, Michigan, Florida, and Maine. While it is reasonable to assume there is some overlap in these teachers’ career decisions, it is also reasonable to replicate the current study with several rural populations, perhaps beginning with one study in each of the U.S. Census or National Association for Music Education regions. This line of inquiry could better help identify regional or state specific reasons for teacher attrition, migration, and retention. Furthermore, we recommend qualitative work with rural music education populations, perhaps as follow-up studies to survey work, in order to find meaning behind any emergent trends. As evidenced from unsolicited follow-up e-mail we received from participants, music educators in the rural West have unique narratives about their often diverse roles in their schools and careers.

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