

## **Fences and Families: A University Project Providing Rural Field Experiences for Pre-service Teachers**

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Rural schools are in a precarious time currently facing funding issues, decreasing resources, dwindling populations, and difficulties hiring candidates for existing vacancies. As a result, a Midwestern university's College of Education sought to help alleviate some of those issues by exposing its pre-service teachers to the benefits of teaching in the college's extensive rural footprint, while emphasizing a connection between school and community. Rural Arts Day (RAD) was designed to address the critical issues facing rural schools by making pre-service teachers more aware of what rural schools can offer, through an alternative field experience in a K-12 school building. With positive results, this pilot project has become the impetus for an ongoing program to be implemented on a regular basis at sites across the state. This university/school partnership, while integrating music, writing and painting across STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) topics, focuses on school and community spirit, with an overall message of the value of teaching in a rural school.

**R**ural schools and their communities are essentially intertwined, with a co-dependent relationship where each provides a lifeline for the other. Each must succeed so the other can exist. Today, though, many of those schools are handcuffed by funding cuts triggering decreasing resources, a dwindling population, and increasing numbers of unfilled teacher vacancies. They are desperate to find qualified teachers to staff their classrooms. Such schools and communities dominate the service footprint of Midwestern University, located in a Midwestern state. Meanwhile, its pre-service teachers with little if any assigned field experience in smaller rural schools, often seek teaching positions in larger urban or suburban areas.

### **History of the Institution**

Midwestern University's geographic service area is a rough triangle, including the northeast, northwest, and southwest corners of the state and stretching diagonally through the middle of a vast rural space that includes 66 of 105 of the state's counties. The COE has a long history of service to its rural schools through its rural education center, but several trends in teacher education have directed its focus toward local partner districts, moving attention away from rural schools in its territory. In a period of roughly 30 years, the college, and teacher education as a whole, transformed through these forces and trends.

### **Finance and Population**

The decline in state support for higher education since the early 1980s is well documented (Kane and Orszag, 2003). The

presentation slide showing intersecting lines of state support, tuition and fees, and charitable fundraising numbers is a staple of every university president in presentations related to funding. What that financial reality has done to teacher education generally, and institutions with large rural service areas specifically, is force the college to focus on areas such as enrollment and customer satisfaction through a market-oriented approach to education at the expense of our service mission. Exacerbating this financial reality during the same period was the declining population in rural areas. When institutions are forced to adopt the strategies of for-profit companies, their attention is naturally drawn to areas rich in potential clients. Thus, the college focused its attention on the urban at the expense of the rural.

### **An Emphasis on Field-Based Education**

The rise of the Professional Development School model (Shroyer, Yahnke, Miller, Dunn, and Bridges, 2014) and an insistence on getting teacher education students into “real” classrooms early and often became a driving concern in teacher education during this period of time (roughly from 1990-present). The COE invested heavily in the PDS model and reaped significant rewards from that investment. Its programs today include a sequence of carefully articulated field experiences developed in collaboration with partnerships fostered through the years primarily with two large area school districts. Having said that, an evangelical devotion to the PDS mindset has also drawn the college’s attention away from approximately 140 potential rural district partners in its service area. Required to build deep partnerships and weave those into the culture of its unit, the college’s mission inevitably helped it lose its appreciation of the importance of providing leadership to rural schools, particularly when combined with the financial and population

realities mentioned above.

### **Diversity**

The other driving force of the past 30 years has been NCATE Standard Four (Miretzky and Stevens, 2012). Every teacher education unit in similar regions has confronted this challenge during this time. The college critically examined faculty and student diversity, and diversity of the students in the schools where teacher education students were placed for field experiences. This created a powerful incentive to build partnerships with districts offering a diverse K-12 student population, created incentives to recruit faculty with research interests tilted toward the urban and recruit undergraduate and graduate students from diverse locations.

In retrospect, the effects that emphasis on cutting costs and seeking students, faculty, and partnerships among large, diverse school districts had are obvious. Less obvious, perhaps, is the effect on the college’s service mission to rural schools. This is not to say a conscious decision was made to turn away from rural schools. Rather, in a time of ever-constricting resources, the range of vision is necessarily focused on the most pressing priorities, in this case, building PDS partnerships and addressing the concern for more diversity. Evidence of the effects of these trends on the college’s commitment to rural schools can be found, but one has to know where to look. Thirty years ago the college hosted a state conference for rural school leaders, a journal on rural education, and its rural center was led by a full professor and assistant dean. One by one, the college’s commitment fell by the wayside.

### **The Arts and Identity**

Added to the shift from rural to urban is the strategic (and financial) shift from a well-rounded education for K-12 to one

focused on core content, including STEM-related education. As schools tightened budgets, electives were often reduced, if not cut. Among the hardest hit has been the arts, especially in this Midwestern state.

**Music.** The arts tend to be the first line item school boards look to cut when faced with budgetary woes. Funding for the arts in this state has been in a state of ebb and flow since the early part of this decade (Blair, 2011; Hanna, 2015; Lowry, 2016). In 2011, the funding for Kansas Arts Commission was eliminated from the state's budget. The plan was to fully fund the commission through private donations; however, over 1.1 million dollars a year were lost in addition to the initial cuts (Blair, 2011). In 2010, the Kansas Music Educators Association launched a longitudinal effort to identify areas of need in music education as a result of the budget cuts to school districts across the state. Author and *Author* (2016) noted that over the course of 2009-2015 nearly 600 music teaching positions had been reported as eliminated; however, workload and expectations remained the same. As the study expanded, the need for professional development and support networks emerged as essential for these teachers. The RAD initiative addresses all the above needs; there is the co-equal integration of music, language arts, community, and professional development. Co-Equal integration referring to Bresler (1995) who describes this type of integration as where both disciplines are represented and taught equally and experienced equally in the classroom.

**Identity.** While helping the college revisit its rural elements, this project also focuses on helping rural communities themselves consider their own identities and remember their stories. As populations dwindle and economic challenges increase, community members often face difficult choices: to remain in their home communities and, in some cases, endure economic

hardship, or to move to an urban or suburban area with more employment opportunities. For some rural students, success has been defined as leaving home and making a better life in a more populated area (Ross, 2003). Students in rural schools are often forced to consider difficult choices years before graduation. This uncertainty can cause students to disassociate from their educational and community environments (Donovan, 2016). The alienation increases when students engage in standardized curriculum that may not adequately address the unique culture of the school and community (Donovan, 2016; Corbett, 2009; Theobald, 1997). An examination of this alienation through a sociocultural perspective sheds light on issues rural students face. Sociocultural theory explores the social, cultural, historical, mental, physical, and political aspects of people's understanding of their lived experiences and how, as individuals, they shape their identities and function within situations of power through agency. *Identity* can be described as a stable, internal state of being that considers the different positions individuals enact or perform in particular settings around social, economic, and historical relationships. Individuals form identities in these settings, reconfiguring their identities in reaction to circumstances. Individuals also may define their identities based on what they believe others expect from them based on messages from others in their communities and from society (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007; Foucault, 2004).

### **Place-based Writing**

Place influences identity (Ross, 2003). The identities rural students form, based on their sense of place, may be reformed as they reposition themselves to allow for new ways of being within existing and developing structures of power in their communities. Though they may feel

alienated and disassociated from their communities, rural students often are still expected to function as stewards of their communities (Donovan, 2016). As they grapple with longings for what once was and at the same time face the uncertainty of what may be, opportunities for connecting—or reconnecting—with their communities can help rural students examine their identities and consider their roles within their local culture. Rural schools across the country are often in the position to be a centering force within the community. When schools broaden their focus beyond a strictly standardized curriculum and adopt a place-conscious approach focusing on the cultural aspects of their communities, rural students who may have become alienated from their school and local environments have the opportunity to reconnect and develop a richer sense of citizenship (Brooke, R. E., 2003). Place-based activities give students an opportunity to develop an awareness and an appreciation for their local setting (Author & Skillen, 2010) and to consider ways to retain or remake their identities within their circumstances.

Place-based writing activities are practices or assignments that have a concept of “place” at their core. “Place” can refer to home, school or community or to a person’s sense of self or being. Writing activities centered on place can afford opportunities for rural students to examine their identities and the impact of their situation and heritage. They can revisit their identities as members of the local culture and often reconnect to the community by focusing on place in their writing. As they compose texts, they may decode the images of their own experiences situated in the world (Gruenewald, 2003). In composing texts such as lyrics and rhythms, students not only consider their place in the world; they also have opportunity to celebrate it.

## **Integration**

Interdisciplinary studies or integrated curricula have been the topics of research for over a quarter century (Fogarty, 1991; Kysilka, 1998; Malik & Malik, 2011). Exploring ways to access multiple entry points for students is essential in providing the most well-rounded education possible. There are many ways in which this model can be implemented. Fogarty (1991) established 10 ways curriculum could be integrated with in a school building or district. Malik and Malik (2011) describe ways these integrated efforts can be successful. Among the requirements are training, scope, level, direction, division of labor, stating objective, establishing themes, solidifying content, creating a timeline, design assessments, clear communication, and evaluating at regular intervals.

With respect to music and writing, Appel (2006) addresses integrated curriculum as it relates to integrating the arts within the school experience and how the arts establish multiple entry points for students to explore content while transforming the environment in support of student learning through a convergence of content and creativity. Barry (2009) found employing a whole school reform model focusing on arts integration revealed several threads. Among these were that these schools promoted a unique and challenging environment, they performed well on standardized tests “generally at or significantly above the state and district averages,” that teachers held more favorable attitudes about the arts, specifically their integration into the entire education of the child, and that the community sees the value of the arts in students’ education.

RAD focuses on introducing a networked model through on-site experiences for faculty and students, providing an insight into how arts integration can be applied and possibly impact the school

curriculum, culture, and community in a meaningful way as well as students' future learning. Addressing each of these issues within the context of RAD was critical to its success.

This pilot program, designed to lead to a larger ongoing project, should not be interpreted as a single, lone-standing inservice presentation; instead, it provides an impactful artistic performance for the audience, as well as those participating. Instead of a one-day event, this is an opportunity to open the pre-service teachers' eyes to the possibilities in a rural school while also emphasizing the power of the arts. In reality, however, in the true nature of most performances, even those viewed or experienced only once can have powerful effects upon their audiences and participants. As those who have experienced seeing *Othello* in Shakespeare's Globe in London, a singular experience can be extremely memorable and moving and provide lasting effects. This project is extremely significant for the field as it provides a similarly moving opportunity designed to emphasize the possibilities of teaching in a rural school.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection**

The school district for this project was selected not because of its uniqueness, but more because it is representative of many of the college's rural districts: a K-12 building serving its community. This district was looked at initially because one of the authors, having met the superintendent briefly, knew the district met the key characteristics of 1) being in the university's service area and 2) having a K-12 building. The district is in a typical rural area with a small enrollment, yet the district covers an extensive amount of land. For the 490-square-mile area of its district, enrollment for 2015-16 was at 415 students K-12, with 22 in

the graduating class that year (district website). According to the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE), the district's students are approximately 46 percent female and 54 percent male. For 2015, the district's dropout rate was 2.8 percent, a full percentage point above the state average of 1.6 percent. For 2016, the district's attendance rate hit 94.3, down slightly from 95 percent for 2015; state numbers were 95 percent in 2016 and 94.8 in 2015. The district's average on the ACT was 23 for 2016; the state average, 21.8.

Participating in the day's activity were representatives of the Curriculum and Instruction Department's secondary language arts program and the School of Music, Theatre, and Dance's music education program. Undergraduates assisting were five music education majors and four speech/theater education and English education majors. Prior to the onset of RAD, the two arts specialists (Music and Language Arts) met to review results from the pilot study and refine the process. They developed an overall plan and a specific yet flexible lesson plan (See Appendix A and B), where university faculty and pre-service teachers could implement the lesson and strategies based on their current classroom experience levels. The result was a 75-minute lesson exploring a community-based arts experience of writing, singing, chanting, and music making.

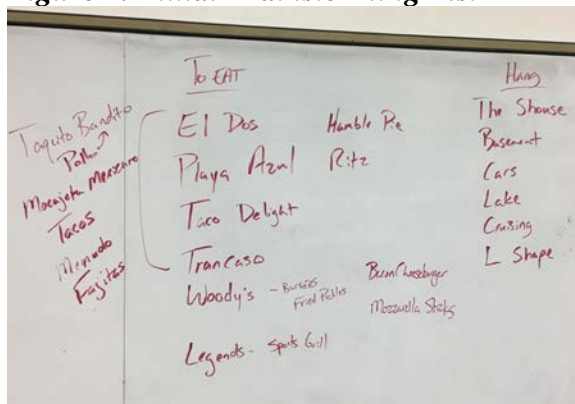
### **The Process**

Allowing for a brief introduction to the power of music and the connecting and community-building qualities it possesses, this process included a gathering song, introductions, and a brief overview. The day began with the school's 100 high school students in the gym, moving to the beat of percussion while singing "Funga Alafia." All participants (university and rural school) were engaged in a welcoming exercise where

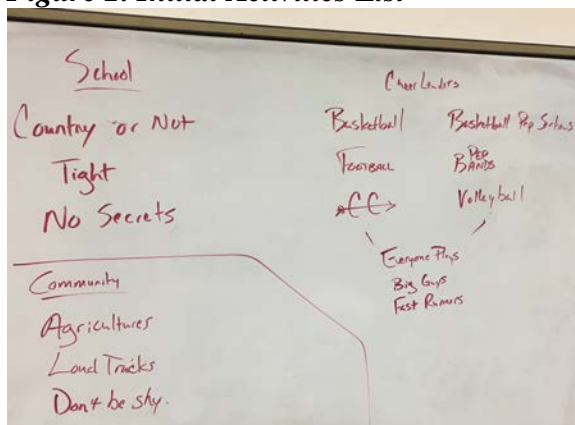
they greeted each other, shared a fact about one another, then greeted others.

The high school students had been pre-grouped into six groups generally based on age, personality, and cohesiveness (about 20 students). Following the introductions and gathering song, students were split into their six groups and sent with their university partners (preservice teachers or university educators) to classrooms. Once in their rooms, they shared additional introductions. Each group then identified school and community traits that made them unique. Grouping these by how they related to each other. Common responses in the pilot study and the full-scale implementation were: food, hangouts, agriculture, history, pastimes, and music. The initial listing is presented in the figures below.

**Figure 1. Initial Brainstorming List**



**Figure 2. Initial Activities List**



Following the categorization of the terms and identifiers, students placed the categories in a 4x4 matrix. Once these were set, they began to fill in the matrix. Careful attention was placed on making musical sense within the matrix. In Figure 6, “Rock” and “Soul” are the defining beats to maintain tempo and meter, providing a bluesy feel. For a more popular feel, these one-syllable words can be in boxes 1 and 3. Depending on the musical independence or level of participants, one can choose to develop one level to act as a metronome. This involves designing level one by adding one-syllable word(s) (preferably the same word) to mimic the steady beat so it acts as the metronome.

**Figure 3. Word Matrix**

|               |              |          |                |               |
|---------------|--------------|----------|----------------|---------------|
| Food          | Bison Burger | Steak    | Ranch Dressing | Cheese cake   |
| Entertainment | Cruisin'     | bonfires | Netflix        | EAT           |
| History       | farming      | dairy    | murals         | train Station |
| Music         | country      | rock     | R&B            | soul          |

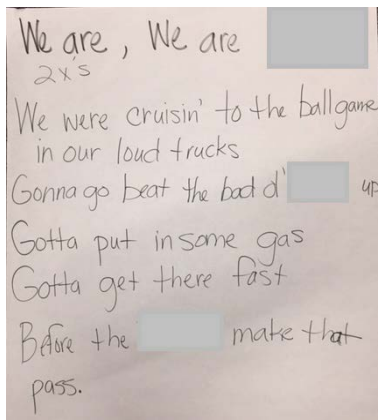
They then set up a beat to provide musical context on iOS Garage Band or through hand drums and other musical instruments. Once the musical context was settled, the students began to chant one line, along with the musical context. Students became more comfortable with how to say it and experimented with inflection, volume, and direction. They made changes; when comfortable, they moved to the next line and repeated the process. Once all lines were learned, they mixed and matched lines until all four were being chanted simultaneously.

The next step was to transfer these “word rhythms” to found sounds or instruments. Students were set in four groups (one for each level) and assigned a level. They took several minutes to experiment

with sounds and instruments to achieve what they felt best represented that category and the words used to depict the category.

The final step was to create lyrics sung to the tune of *We Will Rock You*. Each group got one verse to share their thoughts about the community. Using the lists created at the beginning of the lesson, they revisited their views about the community and created a verse within the rhythmic constructs of *We Will Rock You*. Following the composition of the verse, the group designed a performance process that included chanting, instruments, the verse, and a combination of all three. In some cases, it was designed into its own stand-alone composition. Finally, the individual groups practiced their verses to share with the entire school at the final assembly. One example can be seen in Figure 4. Future teachers paired up and led brainstorming sessions to determine the factors that made the district special. The secondary students generated lists of places, foods, traditions and activities and were challenged to create a rhythm to represent the categories. As the lesson progressed, the phrases morphed into lyrics sung to the melody of "We Will Rock You." The brainstorming groups then united and practiced on stage.

**Figure 4. Final Verse from one of the groups**



A stream of 300 kindergarten through eighth graders filled the auditorium; a

Midwestern University professor taught them the beat, just as he had with the high school students. Each group sang a verse with the refrain, "We are, we are [school name]." The lead teacher taught them an accompanying body percussion to provide their own musical context to the experience. A full transcript of the lesson plan for the individual groups is provided in Appendix B.

## Results

In its initial stages, RAD provided various benefits at all levels of education—K-12 students, faculty, administrators, university pre-service teachers and university faculty. As an outreach activity, its goals involved building relationships and partnering with rural districts.

First and foremost, though, was the practical experience the pre-service teachers received as they helped teach an entire student body, while experiencing the rural school setting. For several, it was their first experience in a small, rural district. It provided an authentic field experience in which they gained a better understanding of rural school—and of their new role as educators. This was evidenced by the undergraduates' conversations during the three-hour drive back to their university. The return trip evolved into professional development on wheels, as they discussed their experiences with their professors as they reflected upon the day's events. The comments ranged from commentary on the students' discussions in their group ("Our group really got into it!" and "My group couldn't stop talking about Arby's!") to recognizing the value of the project in getting students involved ("It was fun to hear what they liked about their town" and "I was surprised how the football players really got into the performance for the little kids."). But it moved to another level as they discussed their role, with one pre-service teacher remarking, "That was a lot harder than I

thought it would be.” The experience helped them move further along in the process of seeing themselves as educators.

### **Limitations**

Prior to revealing implications for the current study, the authors must again stress the limitations of the current structure and its impact beyond the current scope. This pilot was intended to grow beyond and serve as a model for future educators regarding integration of the arts within rural populations. While the results might not be generalizable beyond the current scope, the techniques and strategies should be read, analyzed, and interpreted as transferrable to any number of learning environments. The strategies contained within the current study were then debriefed and shared with other pre-service colleagues followed by refinement and opportunities to teach with similar strategies at various other points during pre-service classes.

### **Implications**

One major aspect of this event—the contributions of pre-service teachers—shows tremendous potential and will be further developed as this project is expanded and implemented throughout the university’s footprint. Collegiate faculty were aware of the talent required to enter an unfamiliar school cold, engage often suspicious adolescents in activities that are departures from the usual day-to-day school routine and foreign to adolescent culture. When strangers take high school students out of their comfort zones and ask them to describe their locale in ways that require honesty and a degree of vulnerability, the potential for pushback is always present. This requires very good teachers who can brush aside the resistance adolescents project when abruptly asked to step outside their carefully constructed teen personas and be expressive. Asking novices

perform to this level is a challenge that was managed, but it is worthy of future study.

Few pre-service teachers have the pedagogical persona this kind of event requires. Recognizing this, college faculty selected its best undergraduates for RAD. All pre-service teachers receive field experiences; yet, the student teaching semester is where skills developed through shorter field experiences begin to crystalize. For these arts events, student teachers, those in the program who are most capable, are not available because they are already in classrooms.

Walking into a high school classroom cold and taking reluctant teenagers through these activities will demonstrate to even the best and brightest undergraduate that there is still room for growth; RAD has caused the college to take a fresh look at students too often taken for granted. Future research could involve a closer examination of what pre-service teachers take from this experience. For several, this was their first experience with an authentic rural school. The college believes strongly that this is another form of diversity, and allowing suburban students to experience rural schools is just as valuable as structuring experiences for them to work in urban schools. Beyond that, the potential for research and reflection in this area is considerable.

Rural Arts Day has moved the college in a positive direction of addressing the needs of our constituents while providing more meaningful pre-service field experiences that increase their rural school connections. We look forward to mapping that territory.

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Appendix A. Time Line for Rural Arts Day

| <b>Rural Arts Day Timeline: Making It Happen</b>   |                                   |  |  |
|--|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Time</b>  | <b>Activity</b>                   | <b>Who is Involved</b>   | <b>Notes</b>   |
| 10 minutes   | Gathering song                    |  | Begin in auditorium or gym.  |
| 5 minutes  | Introductions                     |  |  |
| 5 minutes  | Passing time                      |  |  |
| 65 minutes   | Small groups (hook, lyrics, beat) | 2-3 teachers or pre-service teachers work with HS students in mixed-age/grade level groups of 20 | Groups should be established prior to university group's arrival.  |
| 10 minutes   | Passing time                      | High school students   | Get K-8 students and other audience members in place at this time. |
| 55 minutes   | Final Performance                 | High school students w/K-8 students  | Need auditorium or gym and public address system.                  |
| Total: 2 hours, 30 minutes   |                                   |  |  |
| Note: The university supplies rhythmic instruments, markers, chart paper and other needed items. |                                   |  |  |

Appendix B. Basic Lesson Plan for Rural Arts Day

**Small Group Lesson Plan  
September 30, 2016**

1. Start the session by asking about [name of school]
  - a. How would you describe your town?
  - b. What are some great places to eat?
  - c. What is there to do on the weekends?
  - d. What are some pastimes of the community?
  - e. If we were brand new to town, what would we need to know to become a true part of your community?
2. Building off of their answers, refine them down to three to four categories.
  - a. Food
  - b. Sports
  - c. Community Functions
  - d. Etc.
3. Split into groups and have each group develop a set of words that define their given section.
4. Select words from their lists that have a variety of rhythmic patterns
5. Plug words into the grid and practice saying the row of words.
6. Transfer words to body percussion
  - a. Snap
  - b. Clap
  - c. Patch
  - d. Stomp (One word over-arching theme)
7. Explore the instruments to recreate the sounds of the words through instruments.
8. Build the rhythm experience
9. Divide the group into instruments, BP, and chanting...
10. Model the "hook" over the rhythmic composition.
  - a. We will use *We Will Rock You*
11. Then ask if they have heard the song before... say OK, let's now sing the chorus with me while (select the percussionists) play the backbeat.
12. Then, as a group, create a set of lyrics based on the town for the verses of *We Will Rock You*.
13. Create a composition that demonstrates the rhythmic composition and the song.
14. Practice the performance.
15. **PERFORM!!!!**