

What Rural Means to Me

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"So you're kinda like from the middle of nowhere?" I am asked.

I sit with this question, and struggle to find a response that feels true, honoring, and that will continue the conversation. I grew up at the base of the Little Flat Tops, in the southern part of Routt County, in northwest Colorado; I grew up in a rural place. Although some may describe it as the "small," "quaint," "the country," or some other word that inherently applies the same deficit-based perspective, my home is not the middle of nowhere! It is nestled in National Forest and rich agricultural land. It is the home to the headwaters of the Yampa River, which feeds into the Colorado River. And it is home to the 400 people that live and work in the SoRoCo school district, PreK-12. It is not the middle of nowhere; my home is in the middle of somewhere really special.

Growing up in a rural place has meant access to the outdoors, backpacking trips through the mountains by age four, going to school with one-third of my classmates from preschool to graduation, and learning about where our food comes from with hands-on experience. It has meant learning how to drive on back roads in the old Tiffany Blue Chevy truck and travelling the state and country to make opportunities for myself when programs were inaccessible in our small town. Growing up in a rural place meant commuting an hour to the grocery store, having limited medical personnel in the area, and feeling isolated from the political decision making of the state. To me, rural cannot be defined with a single phrase or experience. Just as every city has unique characteristics, culture, and energy, rural places do as well! Rural spaces are not homogenized places that can be summed up, but this is home I have come to know rural places based on my experiences.

A lot of topics come up when mentioning you are from a rural place or small town. Concerns for the dating scene, comparisons to class sizes in other areas' schools, assuming everyone lives and works

on a farm or ranch, ideas about what my "underprivileged" education looked like, and so many other thoughts flood the conversations surrounding my community. People often assume my community is low income, undereducated, conservative, and minimally diverse. In a long view, some of these assumptions are true. Yet, the accuracy of assumptions does not take away from the harm that the perpetuation of these stereotypes causes.

My rural space is full of beautiful scenery, deep generational wisdom, and the most wonderful children you will ever meet. This is what is true for my community, and in order to summarize my appreciation for my rural space and share some of my wisdom, I want to illustrate my experience as a teaching intern as a high school senior. In this role, I taught agriculture education to students K-5. Getting to hear from five-year-olds about pulling calves in the mountains on a February morning, working in the Colorado State Fish Hatchery with their parents or living off the grid and relying on solar energy opened my eyes to the funds of knowledge these children carry with them. Further, I got to know them as the dynamic young people they are.

A former student and forever friend of mine, Wilder, who as a kindergartner could tell me all the functions of air and wind before I even started our activity, is a large inspiration for my advocacy of rural education. Wilder is a personable, humorous, astute, and resourceful young person. In short, he is really smart. Since he was in kindergarten, the capacity of his brain and the maturity of his personality have shown. No matter if it was teaching me to play chess or schooling me in basketball, Wilder at the old age of 8 has been a great teacher for me. As of recently, he has been identified as twice exceptional, a term that attempts to encompass all that he is. Being twice exceptional means that he is both intellectually gifted as well as a person identified with a dis/ability. Wilder is a wheelchair user because he was born two months early; he is a powerhouse on the inside and out. Being twice exceptional in itself is a unique position but being gifted and a person with a dis/ability in a rural space can come with its own dynamics. While feelings of "otherness" loom within the classroom community for children like Wilder, I cannot help but notice it feels like this is the reality for many rural students.

This is something I wish more "outsiders" knew about our and other rural communities, especially within the topic of rural

education. There are children that matter in these communities who are actively learning in rural spaces, and they are often forgotten! There are exceptional children, like Wilder, who both struggle and thrive in their rural spaces. Of course, many aspects of rurality serve children (gifted, twice exceptional, or otherwise) like small class sizes and personal relationships; but there is typically, also a lack of resources, education, and personnel to serve all the identities of the children in rural schools.

My point is: rural education matters deeply to me, and I think it should to you as well. In Colorado, 80% of school districts are rural. These are real students; they are not hypothetical hillbillies doomed by their geography or social economic status. When the stereotypes of rural places are dropped, rural communities can be seen more openly and realistically. This means better opportunities for celebrations regarding community and school success as well as bringing awareness to improvements that need to be made. So, as I write about my home, community, and perspectives, I urge readers to think of your own pre-conceived ideas about rural areas and reframe your perspective to honor the people who live in the middle of somewhere really special.