What Rural Gets Right:

How Gifted Programming Can Harness the Inherent Strengths of the Rural Community

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In the last few decades, many educational researchers have turned their attention to the unique characteristics of rural communities. Because research is usually based on quantifiable data, those who enjoy studying the academic success of students who live in rural communities have gathered scads of test scores, have delineated categories that would describe rurality, and have invented all sorts of subcategories. They have analyzed everything from the socioeconomic status of the students (usually by counting the number of students who receive Free or Reduced Lunch benefits) to how many miles it is to the nearest population center. While every new study helps to shed some light on a different aspect of education in rural communities, it is doubtful that researchers will ever be able to paint a picture that accurately reflects the vast proportion and intricate complexities that are inherent in such an overwhelming undertaking. The broad generalities which usually conclude these studies are truly helpful in describing the challenges faced by these small and remote school districts. However, in some ways they leave rural educators feeling helpless, as these studies infer that solutions will necessarily involve more money or better staff or leaving the community for a certain length of time – creating a pattern of "deficit thinking" instead of drawing attention to the assets inherent in every rural community. Instead, administrators and teachers should be encouraged to shift their paradigms and recognize their unique differences as strengths to incorporate in their local school district's gifted programs.

Dynamics in Rural Communities

Every rural community is a unique blend of invisible dynamics that can only be truly appreciated and understood by spending a significant amount of time getting to know the different individuals and segments of the population that make up the entire community. Most marked within traditional agricultural communities are the great disparities in wealth, although this would be difficult to ascertain with a casual glance. In the book *Rural Poverty in America*, Flora (1992) wrote, "Poverty tends to be hidden in the nation's midwestern farm communities.

The ideology of 'we're all just folks' serves to hide class differences, and farming-community norms against conspicuous consumption blur what are often substantial differences in wealth and income" (p. 202). Farm families (whether rich or poor) are tied to their land, and have traditionally remained in their respective communities long-term (barring sudden disasters or changes in career aspirations). Similarly, wealthy business owners and entrepreneurs who manage large-scale manufacturing plants in rural communities tend to remain there, but with a higher degree of prestige in the community, which accompanies the unintended familiarity of small town living.

Within these same farming communities, cheap housing lures more transient families – those who are willing to work for low wages, just so they can have a roof over their heads. Feelings of resentment can simmer below the surface as long-term residents wonder who these newcomers are and how long they plan to stay. The established community leaders don't always welcome newcomers, who are perceived as neglecting to embrace traditional values (Flora, 1992). Because most rural communities lack private schools, the children of all of these families are usually combined into small classrooms in the local public schools, with homeschooling as the only other option for education. It is important to realize these underlying, often unmentioned, dynamics, because the research literature does not always have enough data to distinguish the many complex factors that contribute to educational outcomes in rural communities.

Further compounding the issues are the conflicting definitions of the very word "rural." Researchers who would like to study academic achievement in rural schools have discovered that some school districts (such as those just outside a major city) are classified "rural" under the system of using National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) codes without really fitting the typical "rural" concept, which would include wide open expanses dotted with isolated, small villages. In trying to compile educational statistics on rural communities, Kettler, Puryear, and Mullet (2016) outline the confusion that this error in classification presents when attempting to isolate the factors that contribute to academic success in rural communities. They propose that a

combination of three factors be considered in every future research study which includes rural schools: "population density, urban proximity, and school size" (p. 254).

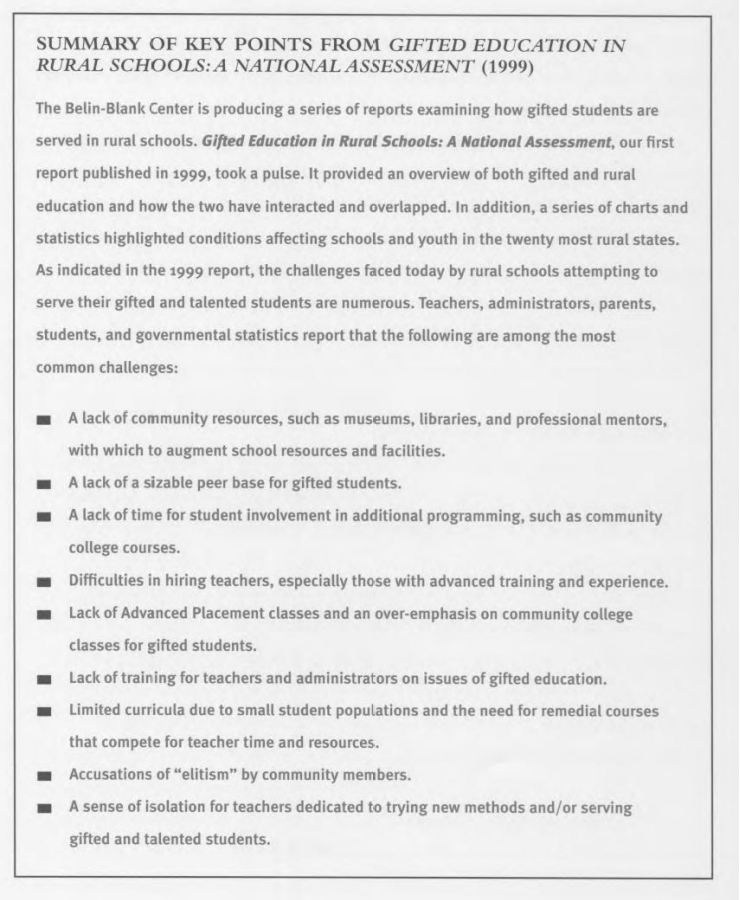
What Makes a Successful School?

Another nebulous concept that gets fuzzier the more you stare at it is how to define a "successful school" and, correspondingly, how to measure student success in school. Recent federal mandates (No Child Left Behind) link school success to high scores on standardized achievement tests (US Dept. of Ed, 2005). Researchers who discount that as an acceptable measure suggest that graduating from college indicates success (Cornbleth, 1983). When it was time to evaluate the effectiveness of Project STREAM (a pre-college program in Wisconsin) over a 13 year period, Clasen (2006) also chose to measure success by level of completed education, asserting that statistics show a correlation between high-school (or college) drop-out rates and low-paying jobs resulting in years of poverty.

So why would this measure of achievement be a problem? Because the definition of success can change based on what a culture values most, and in a rural farming community, what matters most might not be a college degree. Several researchers have suggested that there is a Racial Opportunity Cost (ROC) associated with high achievement in school – the idea that in order to be successful in the schools of the dominant culture, students from minority groups have to give up a part of their identity or sense of belonging to their heritage. (Fuller-Rowell & Doan, 2010; Venzant Chambers & Tabron, 2013; Venzant Chambers, Huggins, Locke, & Fowler, 2014; Lozano, 2015). In his research, Hektner (1995) implied that rural students also experience a sort of "social cost" to pursuing a college education. He theorizes that "rural adolescents are more likely to experience the dilemma of believing that both living close to family and getting away from their area are going to be important in their lives" (p. 11). Lewis (1999) points out that this dilemma is even tougher on gifted girls in rural communities, who may be expected to forego further education in favor of adopting the traditional gender role of caring for a home and family.

Challenges to Overcome

The challenges to academic success in rural communities are real. There are a number of factors that repeatedly rise to the top of complaints when it comes to educating our brightest students in remote places. These factors are best summarized on page 4 in *Gifted Voices in Rural America* (Colangelo, Assouline, & New, 2001), copied here. But the bulk of this same publication, contains a hopeful commentary and several stories which highlight students and teachers who are viewing the uniqueness of their rural communities as the backbone for launching gifted students into their respective futures. Indeed, this seems to be a healthier alternative to hand-wringing and the blame game, and every rural educator would benefit from a steady diet of this encouraging and noble practice of accentuating the positive.



SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS FROM *GIFTED EDUCATION IN RURAL SCHOOLS: A NATIONAL ASSESSMENT* (1999)

The Belin-Blank Center is producing a series of reports examining how gifted students are served in rural schools. ***Gifted Education in Rural Schools: A National Assessment***, our first report published in 1999, took a pulse. It provided an overview of both gifted and rural education and how the two have interacted and overlapped. In addition, a series of charts and statistics highlighted conditions affecting schools and youth in the twenty most rural states. As indicated in the 1999 report, the challenges faced today by rural schools attempting to serve their gifted and talented students are numerous. Teachers, administrators, parents, students, and governmental statistics report that the following are among the most common challenges:

- A lack of community resources, such as museums, libraries, and professional mentors, with which to augment school resources and facilities.
- A lack of a sizable peer base for gifted students.
- A lack of time for student involvement in additional programming, such as community college courses.
- Difficulties in hiring teachers, especially those with advanced training and experience.
- Lack of Advanced Placement classes and an over-emphasis on community college classes for gifted students.
- Lack of training for teachers and administrators on issues of gifted education.
- Limited curricula due to small student populations and the need for remedial courses that compete for teacher time and resources.
- Accusations of "elitism" by community members.
- A sense of isolation for teachers dedicated to trying new methods and/or serving gifted and talented students.

Strengths to Harness

Most importantly, rural communities owe their traditional characteristics of strength and resilience to the people who live there (Howley, 2007). When gifted program administrators are given permission to forge relationships with interesting and exciting people who already live within their same community, they are tapping into a rich resource of inspiration for students who have not yet imagined what it's like to be intelligent and choose to live in the country (Stambaugh & Wood, 2016). Goglin and Miller (2010) point out that some professionals in a

rural community may have multiple skill sets, and those individuals could be a great resource for job shadowing or mentoring.

The intimacy of small towns can grate on everyone's nerves. However, this can also be a strength, as familiarity with neighborhood children increases the chances that at least one caring adult in the school is involved in informally mentoring a gifted student. Lewis (1999) points out that in rural schools, there are smaller classes, which, over time, acquire qualities of an extended family. It must be remembered that classroom teachers set the atmosphere and can have a positive or negative impact on how the perceived differences in students' economic backgrounds affect the total learning environment. Any teacher, no matter their level of training, can facilitate a classroom climate of kindness and high expectations (Lozano, 2015).

Next, local educators should identify the unique sense of place that their rural community emanates, and tap into that knowledge when planning curriculum. Rural communities are usually blessed with plentiful access to nature, and educators should consider getting their students outside on a regular basis. Urban schools might have more money to invest in formal outdoor education programs, but rural schools can take advantage of the wide open spaces just waiting to be integrated into the book-learning which takes place inside the classroom. Most teachers can easily think of scholarly links to ecological science and physical fitness or recreation goals in outdoor education, but Locke (1992) encouraged educators to consider broader possibilities in language arts and history, such as "visiting abandoned farms, mills, and cemeteries, comparing native plants, old world crops, and hybrids, learning the influence of native people on the land, and following the trails of explorers and settlers" (p. 16). Kids who grow up in the country often come to view rural life as a particular gift that they were not conscious of receiving at the time (Colangelo, Assouline, & New, 2001). These ties to the land and appreciation for nature can remain lifelong interests for gifted students, no matter where their future takes them.

Historically, children from farming communities have had reputations for hard work and persevering through adversity. Although as educators, we would never advocate purposely creating a truly hostile environment, we need to recognize that there are tremendous benefits in

facing adversity including the development of future leadership qualities such as resilience, maturity, and innovation (Maxwell, 2000). Even as community leaders lament their lack of resources, they forget that character is built and creativity is fostered as partnerships form to face common obstacles. When students can be included as valued contributors to community meetings, their leadership potential is stretched in ways that cannot happen within a traditional classroom setting (Stambaugh & Wood, 2016). Indeed, many pre-college summer programs involve week-long simulations to energize student creativity and problem-solving; but for a fraction of the cost, gifted students could be invited to contribute to solutions for real-world problems in their hometown (Spicker, Southern & Davis, 1987), and innovative educators could find ways to count this time and mental energy toward an elective credit at any educational level.

When community leaders decide that it is worthwhile to invest in technological advances, gifted students can reap hefty dividends by choosing to walk through those opened doors. In today's schools, grants and state initiatives have made it possible for gifted secondary students to pursue advanced classes in every academic field. One of the most promising ways to bring academic rigor to rural areas is through the Iowa Online Advanced Placement Academy (IOAPA). "By providing online AP curriculum, the IOAPA program helps level the academic playing field for Iowa's rural students" (Baldus, Assouline, Croft, & Colangelo, 2009, p. 1226).

On the opposite side of the technology spectrum, if we can convince students to put away their devices and just spend some extra time reading about and exploring their varied interests, we will do them a world of good. Students who have potential need permission to crawl out of the achievement-oriented pressure-cooker that some schools have become, because every student needs to be reminded of all the ways to love learning. In developing Project SPRING II, focused on identifying rural disadvantaged gifted students, Spicker and Aamidor (1996) noted that these students, who didn't necessarily shine in traditional classroom activities, were "more likely to demonstrate their strengths outside the classroom, e.g., auto and tractor repair, knowledge specific to their rural environment, creativity related to 4-H projects, talent in music and the performing arts" (p. A13). The good news is that this can happen anywhere and anytime, with

minimal facilitation. In New York's Genesee Valley, a summer program called Soaring Stars allows just such an environment for rural students, where teachers base their lessons around what interests the students (Murphy, 2016).

Conclusion

While research is quick to point out the disadvantages of educating gifted students in rural places, those of us who love living in rural places would like to shift the conversation to what rural gets right. We are quick to assume that the "real-world" involves only an urban setting, where competition makes quick work of the unprepared. However, students who are raised in rural settings can thrive when educators at all levels take the time to harness the strengths of rural communities, and use them as the unique characteristics of their local gifted programs. The best way for an educator to do this is to model resolved contentment with current resources, and study the community's unique qualities for hidden treasure. It is important to look at the positives and strive to enhance them, rather than focusing on barriers (Lewis, 1999). Unfortunately, public school districts (required to meet certain qualifications for their funding) rarely have time to fulfill both obligations to teach the national standards and an individually developed place-based curriculum. Azano, Callahan, Brodersen, & Caughey (2017) agree, pointing out that "advocates of improved place-based rural education seek ideologies and curricula that reject the intended normalization of *common* standards and, instead, support and honor the unique characteristics of where children live and attend school" (p. 67). This will require more flexibility in decision making for local school boards, and more courage on the part of administrators and teachers, as they take the lead in turning challenges into opportunities.

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