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ABSTRACT

Devising appropriate service delivery for gifted individuals is never an easy task and is especially challenging in rural areas. Characteristics of rural schools may be both barriers and benefits to gifted education. Limited numbers may mean that programming options for gifted students are unfeasible, but small schools and classes make individuation for any student easier, teachers know their students well, and cross-age grouping may be an option. Limited resources may be a problem, but rural people often have learned to make creative use of what they have. Adherence to tradition may hinder recognition of the need for a differentiated curriculum, but shared values and a sense of community can create the safe environment that gifted learners need to blossom. Systematic planning is needed to develop a coherent set of services. Drawing on currently available provisions for gifted learners and on a needs assessment, the planning committee should design the basic components of the gifted program to be compatible with school and community needs. Components include: a definition that encompasses identified needs; a mission statement; identification process; objectives; framework drawn from one or more program models; and methods for service delivery. Grouping options are discussed, as well as the choice among enrichment options, acceleration options, and ability grouping. Other plan components include the scope and sequence of the gifted curriculum, program evaluation, and building community support. (Contains 16 references.) (SV)

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RURAL GIFTED EDUCATION: ENHANCING SERVICE DELIVERY

Abstract

Rural schools have limited students, personnel, and resources. Devising appropriate service delivery for individuals and groups of students who are gifted, securing suitably qualified teachers, and developing appropriate programs is never an easy task. These challenges become even more problematic for educators in rural communities than in more populous areas. While it is necessary to recognize characteristics of rural communities that can serve as barriers to gifted education, it is more productive to find ways to turn these characteristics into strengths. Popular program models and strategies can be modified to fit the unique needs and character of specific schools and communities. Flexibility and working together can improve education for all learners.

Rural Gifted Education: Enhancing Service Delivery

> *"Giftedness is a greater awareness, a greater sensitivity, and greater ability to understand and transform perceptions into intellectual and emotional experiences" (Roeper, 1982, cited in Silverman, 1993, p. 3).*

Learners who are gifted *are* different from more typical learners as Annemarie Roeper has pointed out. To provide a quality education that will prepare *all* children to be happy and productive citizens, *including those who are gifted*, educators need to be accepting of individual differences and teach keeping those different learning requirements in mind. This goal is not easy in our highly diverse classrooms; however, flexible thinking can make it possible.

The task is simultaneously more difficult and easier in rural classrooms. Let us first look at three of the common barriers that can inhibit appropriate services for gifted learners. *1) Limited numbers.* Typical programming options for learners who are gifted (Borland, 1989; Clark, 1997) are often not feasible in rural areas where the number of students needing differentiation is very small. Rural schools may have only a few students per grade, which requires a different approach to class organization (Spicker, 1991). Some schools may have less than a dozen children in K-8 with the high school children boarding in a town hours away. *2) Limited resources.* There may be few trained educators, each of whom must frequently carry multiple responsibilities. In some schools, one teacher may be responsible for all the math, science and social studies classes, or the principal may teach several classes as well as handle administrative duties. It is difficult to be highly prepared in each area, particularly at the level needed by learners who are gifted (Spicker, Southern, & Davis, 1987). Advanced classes for teachers as well as students are more difficult to obtain in rural areas, usually requiring driving great distances or using some variation of long distance or web-based learning. Physical resources are limited by the smaller tax base, including buildings, books, computer hardware and software, and science labs within the school, and the support systems in the community (Spicker, 1991). *3) Adherence to tradition.* For good or ill, the country, the whole world, is changing more rapidly than ever before. In rural areas traditional values remain largely intact and a limited acceptance of diversity in the family and community continues. While this can be a source of strength, it can seriously hinder the recognition that some students need a differentiated education. Occasions for children and youth to explore beyond the traditional curriculum are limited. Educational experiences and careers that are either nontraditional or outside the community are frequently not seen as feasible either by the students or the adults. Such opportunities may even be considered unwarranted special privileges (Jones & Southern, 1992).

Rural schools have advantages too, many coming from the very characteristics that can create problems. *1) Limited numbers.* Small schools and classes mean that teachers often know all the students and their families,

making it easier to cross-age group students by allaying potential fears of exposure to older children and facilitating monitoring. Fewer students per teacher makes individualization for any student easier. Identification of unique needs can be simplified by the low numbers and greater knowledge of the students. *2) Limited resources.* People in rural areas are frequently accustomed to being self-sufficient and adapting what they have to meet their needs precisely because resources are limited. This ability to make creative use of resources can be turned to adapting traditional strategies and resources for teaching gifted learners to meet local needs. *3) Adherence to traditions.* Shared values and sense of community can be channeled to offer the safe environment that is so necessary for gifted learners to blossom. It is traditional for community members to work together to solve a problem, complete a task, meet a need. This atmosphere of cooperation is often carried over into the schools. When advanced education for a bright child is seen as an important need not only for the child but the community, sharing resources to provide advanced education is more likely (Spicker et al., 1987).

Characteristic Needs of Gifted Learners

Gifted and talented children have cognitive and affective characteristics that set them apart from their more typical classmates. Like all children, they will more readily grow to be happy and productive adults when they are provided with an education that takes into consideration their unique learning needs (Clark, 1997). The regular classroom is considered the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities because nondisabled learners are educated there (Hallahan & Kaufmann, 2000). For children who learn at an accelerated pace, thrive on complex content, retain learned material easily, use stored knowledge logically, and who frequently already know the lesson, the regular classroom and the regular curriculum can be seriously restrictive because their needs are *not* typical (Clark, 1997). Not only do they have advanced cognitive skills and needs, they also differ affectively.

> To the uninformed, giftedness may seem a sort of special privilege, but to the gifted individual, often it feels like a distinct disadvantage. It is painful to be different in a society that derides differences. Pain may also come from internal sources-from a finely tuned psychological structure that experiences all of life more intensely. Giftedness has an emotional as well as a cognitive substructure: cognitive complexity gives rise to emotional depth. Thus, gifted children not only *think* differently from their peers, they also feel differently. (Silverman, 1993, p.3)

Developing a Systematic Plan

Program models and strategies of instruction that work in large communities may not be effective or even possible in small schools (Pitts, 1986; Van Ert & Wolf, 1996). Nevertheless, the planning process is still the same even if the methods of service delivery differ. As Borland (1989) points out, systematic planning is needed to develop a coherent set of services. Initial planning includes: 1) appointing a committee to oversee the development of a program of services, 2) determining what if any provisions for gifted learners are currently available, and 3) conducting a needs assessment to determine how many children would benefit from differentiation in specific subjects, and what resources are available.

From this data the committee should begin designing the basic components of a gifted program so that they are compatible with the needs of the school and community: 1) Develop a definition that encompasses the major areas identified by the needs assessment; 2) Write a philosophy or mission statement with supporting rational for providing gifted services; and 3) Devise an identification process that is broad enough to locate as many students as possible that would profit from differentiated instruction while not being prohibitively expensive in time and resources (Borland, 1989), keeping in mind the ethnic and economic composition of the community. So far being a small, rural school or consortium of schools offers more advantage than handicap by allowing less formal collection of information than in larger communities and with a quantity of data that is easier to manage.

Identification can be an especially delicate topic is small towns. Procedures need to be written and open to the public, including a policy for handling grievances. A blind review based on multiple criteria and conducted

by a committee is recommended to avoid hard feelings and even a hint of favoritism (Pitts, 1986). Misinformation and misunderstanding about gifted programs and identification procedures are common problems in any community if care is not taken to ensure open communication (Borland, 1989). The problems are magnified in small communities where citizens have known each other for years, and often for generations. Methods used for identification should take into consideration the differences in background between rural and urban communities and employ more nontraditional assessments. (See Spicker et al. (1987) for specific suggestions.)

Devising a defensible curriculum for learners who are gifted and practical methods to deliver the instruction are rarely easy. Models that work for large school districts appear overwhelming and out of place when applied to a handful of children scattered over wide distances in communities of one or two hundred or even a few thousand. Again, the components of program planning are the same as for larger communities; flexibility is the key to successful implementation. The committee needs to design a program that includes the following: 1) goals to be achieved; 2) one or more program models to provide a framework; and 3) a selection of methods for service delivery. Goals need to reflect the students' ability to learn at a rapid pace knowledge, concepts, and skills beyond what is typically expected of students by the end of high school. Challenge and rigor need to be embedded in each goal so that real learning takes place and the students learn *how* to learn. No model of instruction should be implemented without some modification since all schools and communities differ to some extent. Combining pieces from several models is an effective way to meet local requirements (Borland, 1989).

Grouping and Service Delivery Methods for Rural Settings

The family-like atmosphere often found in small rural schools (Spicker, 1991) can be a support when creating the differentiated instruction required by gifted learners to reach their potential. Typical grouping options include: individualized instruction, regular classroom, within class grouping, cluster grouping, cross-age grouping, subject grouping, resource room, special class, special school (Borland, 1989). Some of these groupings immediately lend themselves to small schools, such as 1) individualized instruction either within or outside of regular classes; 2) cluster grouping in schools with more than one section of a grade; 3) cross-age grouping over two or more grades in full-time classes, such as a cluster of gifted learners in a subject or class, or in a pull-out resource room. With the exception of individualization, these methods permit gifted learners to have time with their intellectual peers, a strategy that is highly recommended for meeting both cognitive and affective needs (Clark, 1997; Davis & Rimm, 1998; Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994).

The next component is deciding on program options based on whether they enrich, accelerate, or group by ability. Clark (1997) points out that none of these administrative arrangements should be considered as the sole programming option for gifted learners; each meets different cognitive and affective needs. *Enrichment options* include curriculum compacting, independent study, use of contracts to organize individualized instruction, tiered assignments, learning centers, computer-based instruction, mini units on student interest, problem-based learning units, instruction based on Junior Great Books, academic competitions, mentorships and internships, Saturday and summer programs, correspondence courses, and international experiences (Davis & Rimm, 1998). Individual need and age help determine which choices are most appropriate. The above enrichment options can be implemented with relative ease in any size school. Acceleration should also be available for some students. *Acceleration options* include: early admission to kindergarten or first grade, middle school, high school, or college; subject skipping; grade skipping; credit by examination for any grade or for college classes; advanced placement courses; college courses in high school; dual enrollment in high school and college; telecourses; correspondence courses; and talent searches (Davis & Rimm, 1998). Achieving a flexible program that incorporates selected enrichment and accelerative option can be easier to manage with just a few students than in large schools. Ability grouping, however, can be much more of a challenge when there are few students to group. Cross-age grouping combined with cluster grouping can be employed in selected subjects to facilitate enrichment and/or acceleration. When assigning students to small groups, teachers need to place gifted learners together the majority of the time so they will be challenged to learn at a high level rather than acting as tutors (Clark, 1997).

Being flexible and designing the services to take advantage of local strengths will be more effective than trying to emulate large districts (Bull, 1987).

Curriculum Development

Differentiating the regular curriculum is a necessity for learners who are gifted. The challenge is not only to develop quality services, it is also to combat disbelief that some children can and should learn more than others. As Thomas Jefferson so aptly stated, "There is nothing so unequal as the equal treatment of unequals" (Clark, 1997, p. 4). Gifted learners also require a special education to develop their full potential.

A scope and sequence is critical for coherent and coordinated curriculum development. The scope is the depth and breadth of the knowledge, concepts, and skills be taught. The sequence lays out the order and specific years the information will be introduced, practiced, and mastered.

Van Tassel-Baska (1994) recommends the following guidelines for developing a defensible sequence:

1. Limited review of prior material learned.
2. Progressive development in skill acquisition.
3. Logical ordering of courses based on the underlying organization of the discipline of study.
4. Concern for progressive development of concepts.
5. Increasing complexity in product demands rather than increasing quantity.
6. Flexibility regarding entry and exit points based on age/grade-level. (pp. 75-76)

Some of her suggestions are easier to implement than others, and therefore, are good places to begin.

Final Components of a Systematic Plan

Program evaluation is also necessary to ensure quality services that remain sensitive to student needs (Borland, 1989). While this is often the most intimidating and overlooked part of program design, it is potentially easier to envision and monitor in small schools simply because of size. A comprehensive program cannot be developed overnight; it is a process that takes place over many years and is enhanced by frequent evaluation and careful revision (Borland, 1989). Therefore school officials can feel relieved of the pressure to design and develop the "perfect plan." Program evaluation should be viewed as an opportunity to gather data in order to make effective decisions as to which components of the current program work and what changes and additions should be incorporated. It is the mechanism that allows refinement.

A process for building administrative and community support should be included so that once services are initiated they will be maintained. Effective methods include creating a strategic plan, providing regular and coherent teacher preparation (Borland, 1989), and organizing a schedule of public relations that targets the various populations internal and external to the school (Karnes & Lewis, 1997; Lewis & Karnes, in press). Because gifted learners are capable of comprehending, using, and retaining greater quantities of knowledge, concepts, and skills at a more complex level than typical learners during the same instructional time (Van Tassel-Baska, 1994), a flexible program of services is essential. Such individualization will take the cooperation of teachers, principals, parents, and community members. Administrative support from the superintendent and school board are vital for success so that the fear of elitism does not deprive students of specialized instruction and opportunities to use their talents because their strengths are intellectual, academic, or artistic rather than athletic (see The Paluzzi Ploy in Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994, pp. 91-92).

When beginning a new program, it makes sense to start small and add additional services as success enhances community support (Pitts, 1986). An effective way to gather this support is to describe the characteristics and needs of gifted learners and provide examples of how meeting their educational needs will benefit the community (Lewis & Karnes, in press). Jones and Southern (1992) found that teacher and coordinator training was effective in changing negative attitudes towards serving gifted learners. Videotapes enable some of the biggest and best-known authorities in gifted education to share their expertise at training sessions for educators (Karnes & Lewis, 1996) and community gatherings of all kinds. These videotapes can be borrowed from the library of a nearby university either directly or through interlibrary loan.

Small schools and communities *can* provide high quality education for all their children, including those who are gifted. Networking with other educators through college and university classes, professional organizations, conferences, and over the Internet helps break down the barriers of distance and isolation. Teachers, principals, counselors, parents, and even the students themselves need to work together with community leaders to create unique and satisfying educational opportunities. Working together - that sounds like a traditional rural approach to meeting local needs.

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