

Gifted in Rural Louisiana: Past, Present, and Future

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Keith Courville

Louisiana State University

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Abstract:

(Purpose) This literature review explores the status of gifted education within the confines of predominately rural districts, such as those in Louisiana, in an effort to increase awareness of some of the unique struggles of both gifted programs and students. **(Findings)** Topics addressed in this paper include: (1) the prevalence of rural schools in the American educational system; (2) financial and systematic issues pertaining to rural educational systems; (3) historical and modern definitions of giftedness; (4) challenges facing identification programs incorporating modern definitions of giftedness within their operational framework; (5) limitations of services for gifted students offered in rural districts; (6) status of Louisiana in meeting identification and service recommendations; (7) and possible cost effective solutions for rural programs. **(Conclusions)** Despite challenges and pervasive problems within the areas of finances and human resources, as well as the tendency to use historical, rather than modern, methods of identifying and serving gifted students, there are cost effective and achievement orientated solutions for gifted programs in rural schools and districts.

Background: Rural Education

Both the terms “gifted” and “rural” have suffered from a wealth of misconceptions pertaining to the manner in which we describe these concepts. Thus, an appropriate definition for rural areas must be established and common misconceptions must be addressed before we can view gifted programs within the context of a rural environment. Provasnik, et.al. (2007) in a report from the National Center of Educational Statistics define rural school districts using two criteria, the population of the district and its distance from an urban area. Using this definition, there are certain misconceptions that must be addressed regarding rural schools and their respective districts. First, while a rural school may have a small population compared to an urban school, this is not always the case, once you factor in location relative to urban centers. Ultimately, within a district, population of each individual school is highly dependent on the number of schools within a district and the division of students between those schools. In districts with fewer schools, one large school with a high population can still be defined as a rural school. Thus, in dealing with our misconceptions, we must note that population alone is not a sole determinant of rural status. Even schools serving a large population of students face the same issues prevalent in rural schools serving a smaller population.

Now armed with a proper definition of rural schools and the districts in which they reside, we can begin to examine the substantial portion of our educational system that is defined as rural. Johnson and Strange (2007), cite 28.6% of our nation’s schools as being classified as rural by the federal government and also note that 31.5% of Louisiana’s schools are designated as rural. While the difference between Louisiana and the rest of the nation does not look significant on a school basis, when we examine population distributions, the gap at the state and national level widens. When examining the percent of students who attend rural schools the

number stands at 21.4% nationally and at a much greater 28.8% of students in Louisiana (Johnson & Strange, 2007). These numbers would lead us to not only conclude that Louisiana exceeds the national average in terms of the number of rural schools and the number of students who attend those schools, but that Louisiana's rural schools follow the trend of often having a single rural school serving a large population away from a major urban center. Besides having to face the prospect of serving a large number of rural students at each school, Louisiana faces another challenge in comparison to other schools in the nation. Johnson and Strange (2007) report that of the students attending rural schools that 59.5% of rural students in Louisiana qualify for free or reduced lunches, while only 38.5% of students in the nation as a whole would qualify. Clearly rural schools in Louisiana have the added challenge of serving a greater number of lower socio-economic status students.

Specifically, the high number of students in poverty attending rural schools, both in Louisiana and across the nation, contributes to the primary issue effecting rural schools as a whole. Funding, or the lack of funding, is a ubiquitous concern affecting every level of the educational process from district, to school, to a per student basis. Horst and Martin (2007) explain the link between lower socio-economic populations and the lack of funding for rural schools by stating:

Finance poses another potential hurdle for rural schools. The issue of funding, especially in this time of state funding reduction, results from the practice in many states of basing funding levels upon local property taxes, figured by using attendance data (p. 34).

The major challenges facing rural schools are not limited solely to finances and the economic status of the communities which they serve. In addition to the financial issues, rural

schools face significant challenges regarding human resources. Specifically, rural school districts are unable to find and/or hire individuals with proper certification for the classes they are teaching (USDESE, 2002). Besides the inability to procure qualified teachers, rural schools face the added challenge of retention, with rural school districts demonstrating significant teacher turnover as well as the greater tendency for rural students to have inexperienced teachers in comparison to other student populations (McCullough & Johnson, 2007).

Thus in conclusion, rural environments, whether they are districts, schools, or the student population, are a substantial portion of the educational experience on both a national level and within the state of Louisiana. Furthermore, rural schools, due in part to the communities in which they serve and the manner in which they draw funding from property, have significant difficulties in raising sufficient finances. This lack of financial security influences a number of school services, but most notably can negatively influence the ability of a school to obtain and retain qualified teachers.

Background: An Inclusive Definition of Giftedness

While the manner in which we defined rural educational environments may be described as relatively straight forward, the historical legacy behind the definition of giftedness and its use in the educational process represents a continual development and refinement of the term. As we examine the initial definition and view its development our primary focus should be on the increased inclusivity within the conceptual framework of who is gifted and what it means to be designated as gifted.

The American study of giftedness began with a narrow focus on academic achievement. Lewis Terman, the early preeminent researcher in the field, viewed giftedness as synonymous

with academic achievement, and focused his research primarily on students who achieved; achievement was predictably correlated with such factors as family income, majority cultural status, and parental education (Jolly, 2008). The problem with Terman's definition and profiling is that it did not define giftedness as a potential to achieve, and thus excluded many individuals who would be able to be highly successful academically with interventions aimed at dealing with the environmental factors limiting their academic progress.

Terman's definition was also limited in the notion that intelligence is a measure of or directly correlated to academic achievement as defined by success within a standard curriculum. Later, in the 1950's, work by J.P. Guilford expanded the concept of intelligence to areas beyond traditional school scenarios and paved the way for modern theories on intelligence, such as those from Howard Gardner (Delisle, 1999).

Regarding modern definitions of giftedness, two inclusive views are offered by Joseph Renzulli and Howard Gardner. Renzulli (1978) declares that "no single criteria should be used to identify giftedness (p. 182)." Instead, Renzulli (1978) views giftedness as an interaction of multiple factors within an individual such as motivation and natural ability. While these aspects may be influenced by a person's environment, the environment is not a sole determinant of giftedness, which in turn expands the definition of giftedness to individuals and groups who have not historically been viewed as academically superior.

Gardner's work primarily focuses on intelligence and the areas or systems in which intelligence can be defined; the implication of this work is that intelligence exceeds the academic realm and can be demonstrated independently in numerous areas (Gardner, 1983). In his recent work, Gardner and his researchers have defined nine areas of intelligence, including such

domains as those dealing with personal communications and philosophy (Von Karolyi, Ramos-Ford, & Gardner, 2003). The expansion of giftedness to also include areas not traditionally served or explored within the context of school is also echoed by the Marland (1972) report.

All of this historical legacy can be viewed as coming to a culmination with the National Excellence (1993) report, which gives an extensive and detailed definition of gifted students and the role of giftedness within education:

Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment. These children and youth exhibit high performance capacity in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, and unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields. They require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools. Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor (p. 19).

This definition provides an excellent perspective on giftedness for a number of reasons. First, it views giftedness in terms of both existing achievement and the potential to achieve. Second, multiple areas are recognized as being avenues for performance. Third, this statement articulates the need for special services unique to the gifted. Finally, this definition recognizes that giftedness is prevalent in society among all socially constructed groups. The implication is that the proportion of gifted students in the general population should be similar, whether we are dealing with urban versus rural students or higher versus lower socioeconomic status.

Gifted in Rural Areas

In examining the development of giftedness as an operational definition within the confines of our educational system we immediately notice a trend for inclusiveness which has the potential to provide opportunity for inclusion of rural students. Given that incidence of giftedness within a rural population should be the same as other populations, rural gifted programs should have the same resources as their peers in other areas. However, given the aforementioned pervasive funding deficiencies in rural schools, gifted students face extra challenges in obtaining the services which they need. Within rural gifted programs, the issues prevalent in rural schools affect two major areas of gifted education: identification of gifted students and services for gifted students.

The most important aspect of having an effective identification program is using a modern definition as a standard for all steps in the identification process, such as initial identification, referral, and assessment. Unfortunately, a survey by Ford et al. (2002), reveals that the majority of states do not use a modern definition of giftedness and that fifteen states are using definitions that have been in place for more than two decades. Without definitions that demonstrate the inclusiveness of modern frameworks of giftedness, many students who are gifted and/or have the potential for achievement, may never be identified and never referred to services to assist them in meeting their potential.

Of particular concern is the possibility that many states are reliant on definitions that focus on existing achievements rather than future potential. In a report by the Louisiana Department of Education's Rural Gifted Task Force (2002), it is recommended that achievement cannot be the sole means of measuring giftedness in rural students given the tendency for rural students to lack opportunity for educational enrichment. Presently, many students in rural areas simply may not have had the chance to experience as much educational opportunities as peers in

urban areas. Rural students may lack simple experiences, such as field trips to museums or art galleries, which may spark a student's interests and passions. However, if a state, district, or school does not take into account this disparity present among rural students compared to their urban or more affluent peers, then rural students will consistently be underrepresented in gifted programs.

Furthermore, given the already stressed situation that many rural schools and districts find themselves in regarding finances and the funding of programs, one would expect that gifted programs, which even when inclusive, only serve a small portion of the overall population are not highly prioritized in budgetary matters. Besides the issue of funding, gifted programs would also be limited by the same human resource issues that plague all rural schools, specifically the hiring and retention of experienced, qualified teachers. Indeed given the lack of finances and difficulty in staffing, Louisiana Department of Education, in regard to gifted services and curriculum, states, "much of the curriculum for the gifted is disjointed and based on administrative convenience" (p.3).

Possibilities in Addressing Rural Issues

Even though there are challenging issues facing rural schools and districts in regard to their gifted programs, there are cost effective solutions, initiatives, and programs that also adhere to the principles of modern gifted education. While even using all of these possible solutions do not directly deal with root causes by altering revenue sources and tax policy, some alleviation of the current situation should occur. Fortunately, there are ways of assisting both the method of selection and the services offered by gifted programs.

First and foremost, gifted programs in rural areas must adopt modern definitions which recognize the potential for any student, regardless of environment or background, to be designated as gifted. After recognizing the full breadth and variability of gifted students, including multiple areas in which giftedness can be demonstrated, districts must adapt their testing policy to match their new definitions.

One way in which a district can alter its testing policy is to use non-verbal testing. Non-verbal testing allows for a fuller range of students to be identified as gifted, as the testing goes beyond traditional measures of intelligence and is not dependent on verbal fluency which may limit some students (Lewis, 2001). Non-verbal testing is not a singular solution; ideally it should be used in conjunction with other forms of assessment such as traditional intelligence tests and/or portfolios.

When discussing curriculum for gifted students we have to consider the definite possibility that the standard curriculum is simply insufficient for meeting the needs of gifted students. Curriculum modifications must go beyond and extend the curriculum to a depth that provides a challenge for gifted students (Louisiana Department of Education, 2002). If there are not the resources needed for modifying curriculum, then acceleration may also be an option to challenge gifted students within the confines of existing curriculum. However, even single grade level acceleration may not be enough for exceptionally gifted students, as though they may be encountering content sooner, the content still may not be of the level or depth appropriate for gifted students. Also, even with appropriate academic rigor, the curriculum may not have the variety needed to explore all designated areas of giftedness. In this situation the gifted student and their parents may have to look for community based opportunities such as civic groups, competitive organizations, or summer camps.

Conclusions

Given the immense challenges already facing rural school districts, it is no surprise that issues such as funding and personnel difficulties carry over into gifted programs. In addition, rural gifted programs have other unique problems such as those pertaining to using modern standards of identification and assessment practices which reflect modern theories of intelligence. While no single solution to the problems facing rural gifted programs exists, small changes such as adopting modern definitions, using alternative assessment methods, and expanding existing curriculum may improve upon the status quo until other more comprehensive solutions may be found. In the end, while the current situation is the product of systematic problems endemic in rural areas, there is the potential for positive action on the behalf of gifted students and programs.

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