Broadening Perspectives to Meet the Needs of Gifted Learners in Rural Schools

Diane Montgomery
Oklahoma State University

Abstract

The purpose of this discussion is to demonstrate the importance of developing a broad perspective when meeting the needs of children and youth who are gifted and live in rural areas. A narrow perspective of one program for one type of giftedness restricts the usefulness of rural resources. Families who have inhabited places for generations have close connections to "place" and often feel emotional ties to the values of such places. Discovering and maximizing the resources specific to the rural area may help rural educators in providing educational plans and services for gifted learners, building a future that is as solid as the successes experienced in the earliest history of rural education. This discussion uses the lens of motivational theory, specifically the development of initiative for gifted learners, to broaden perspectives in thinking about the ways rural schools can connect to rural communities to provide differentiated services for gifted learners.

Once my father, who was born and raised on a small farm in northern Minnesota, was in a conversation with a man who owned a ranch in Texas. Proud of the thousands of acres he managed, the Texan said to Dad, "Yes, I can wake up in the morning and drive all day before I reach the end of my land." Our family farm was very small with only eight cows that Dad and Mom milked twice a day and the only crop was the hay that was made during the few, long summer days and put up in the barn for the purpose of feeding these cows over winter. Dad took some time to ponder deeply what the Texas rancher had just said to him. With a forlorn look on his face, my father replied slowly and sympathetically, "Gee, tough luck for you. You know, I had a truck like that once."

The way that people define their reality is dependent on their own experiences and culture. So, is "rural" big or small for Dad and his Texan friend? It depends on one's perspective. Taking a perspective that builds on current values and strengths of a rural place can enhance the ways that schools and communities view their relationship and their assets (Colangelo, Assouline, Baldus & New, 2003). Rural schools have their own strengths (Wooley, 1999). Colangelo et al. reinforce the priority for using the strengths of rural schools to meet the needs of gifted learners. The strengths of rural schools include small class size, low dropout rate, community support, teacher autonomy, and multiple opportunities for student to be participants in a broad range of school activities. However, at the same time, these authors note "although these strengths have not yet translated into advantages for gifted students in rural schools, they can become advantages" (p. 572). Two of these rural strengths can be used to promote responses to the development of gifted learners, particularly adolescents. The two strengths that will be underscored in this discussion are community support and the many activities available in rural and schools and communities. Community support can be more broadly viewed to include the geography and the culture of the rural area. And, students can be invited and encouraged to participate in multiple extra-curricular and community-based activities as part of their school program. These are goals for both community and school providing a relationship that can be direct and mutually beneficial. It is this relationship that distinguishes rural strengths, one that is not readily developed in large communities or urban areas.

A recent report on gifted learners in rural areas (Colangelo, Assouline & New, 1999; 2001) found that half of all public schools in the United States today are in small towns and rural areas and 39% of all public school students (17.5 million) live in rural communities. Despite the significant presence of rural schools, school reform efforts are dominated by prescriptions that promote larger, more centralized, more "urbanized" schools (Reynolds, 2001). The prescriptions may not be appropriate for rural schools. Consolidation of rural school districts may make them look urban, but urban reform that promotes economic efficiency does not help schools to capitalize on the strengths of their rural community (Howley, Howley & Pendarvis, 2003). Reforms that may be appropriate for urban districts serve to weaken rural schools. School reform issues are not the same for schools of such diverse needs, such as those in rural areas.

An articulate and well-developed view presented by Howley et al. (2003) includes a cry for a return to the meaning of rural and the need to "ruralize" (p. 96) gifted education. As urban districts recognized their failings for vast numbers of children with talent and potential, techniques were devised to identify, through the most efficient and effective assessments, the students with the most potential who would need
focused programs. The program models in gifted educational history were designed for urban areas. Howley et al. suggest changing global sociological perspectives to allow, acknowledge or even encourage students to develop the talents that are useful or valued in their rural communities.

This discussion will focus on ways that rural schools and the communities in which they are situated can orchestrate methods to foster the talent development of its youth. Others have detailed the barriers to providing gifted programs in rural areas (Spicker, Southern & Davis, 1987). The barriers included needing greater sophistication and support for identification and differentiated services. Merely resolving these barriers will not result in a reform in thinking; rather, children living in rural areas can maximize their education by making choices, with advice and support of families and teachers, to stay involved in their schools and communities. In other words, a small rural district attempting to hire the personnel trained at the doctoral level in school psychology and gifted education teaching specialist may be the ideal goal, but it may not be practical in getting actual services to students who need them to reach their academic and emotional potential. The families and teachers of these students can work together with what the community has to offer to differentiate learning experiences. The theoretical support for these methods is provided through the component of motivation theory that is known as personal agency, or initiative (Larson, 2000).

**Theoretical Framework**

When discussing the needs of children with parents and community members, we often hear how important it is to know that our youth will grow up healthy and happy, find something they like to do to make a living, learn to serve and contribute to society in a meaningful way, and feel satisfied with the meaning of things and people in their lives. In this list of life successes for humanity, grade point average, number of degrees earned, or the value of a retirement portfolio are not named among the ultimate priorities. We often hear and have come to know the conventional wisdom for happiness and joy in living. The psychological literature is calling this **optimal positive development** (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1997; Larson, 2000).

Optimal positive development includes an extensive body of literature; however, one aspect will be the focus of this discussion, which aims to connect positive development to rural education. Studies by Larson (2000) and others (Dworkin, Larson & Hansen, 2003) provide the theoretical support for viewing rural education strengths broadly as supportive of gifted learners. Larson connects optimal positive development to the motivational construct of personal agency, or initiative. Viewing initiative as a quality essential to positive development, Larson discovered that initiative occurs when intrinsic motivation and concentration are both at high levels. Larson studied adolescents in regular life activities, such as schoolwork, class experiences, experiences with friends, and structured organizational activities in school or the community. Results indicate that for academic class experiences, intrinsic motivation is low and concentration is high. For social experiences with friends, intrinsic motivation is high, but concentration is low. However, sports experiences and experiences during arts, hobbies, and community and school organizations provide both high intrinsic motivation and high concentration. For example, imagine a group of adolescents working on the school newspaper. These students are meeting deadlines, facing challenges, solving problems, and choosing to be involved with such responsibility and high-level, real-life problems. These qualities of the tasks are the requirements of an appropriately differentiated curriculum for gifted learners (VanTassel-Baska, 1998; 2000; 2003). Programs such as Outward Bound, Boys and Girls Club have shown remarkable success in increasing internal locus of control, independence, self-efficacy, assertiveness and self-control, variables closely associated with Larson’s concept of initiative, and, at the same time, closely associated with outcomes of comprehensive curriculum.

The language that is used by students working in settings that promote initiative provides further support for encouraging students to participate in activities that have both high intrinsic motivation and high challenge. Students who are practicing talent areas demonstrate initiative differently from students participating in class activities (Larson). Language relates to the high level and often complex work they are doing. The language usage of rural students often differentiates them from their urban counterparts (Howley et al., 2003). School and community organizations provide an “environment of possibilities” for planning, sustained focus, creative problem solving, and leadership. These opportunities assist rural students in working in the real world to communicate with professionals and others outside of
their community. Intellectual skills, such as probability thinking, reflection, evaluative thinking with realistic information, and abilities to seek help from adults are consistently enhanced in studies of youth organizations both in school and in the community.

**Community and School Relationship**

Talent development occurs in the community, not solely at the site of the school building. An asset of rural schools is its close tie to community (Bull, 1987; Helge, 1981). Success reported by a federally funded (Jacob Javits Gifted and Talented Act) program for gifted learners in a rural region of Oklahoma capitalized on its school-community linkages (Barber, Bledsoe, Pequin & Montgomery, 1999; Montgomery, 2001). This project discovered that linkages to service learning projects, community cultural events, and elders and leaders in the community were often the best methods of differentiation for high school students identified as gifted.

Rural areas are diverse with their own set of local knowledge, defined as “ways of being in the world as well as perceptions and understandings about a particular place” (Howley et al., 2003, p. 85). This knowledge will color the ways that students learn the academics that have little or no connection to their own world. On the other hand, accelerated learning of complex and deep information is possible when valued within the sphere of the local knowledge. For example, on a recent visit to a small island community, it was learned that although saturated with tourists in the summer only a small number of families are year-round residents. The school is very small, but closely connected to the community and the island and its ecology. The values of the space are rooted in the school’s curriculum with kindergarten children learning to band birds. Advanced identification and categorization skills are practiced in early elementary. Local community organizations that focus on birds are heavily involved with the school and children work extensively in the field. At the same time, parents feared that the lack of larger circles for social interaction would hinder their children’s development. Which view is most appropriate may be dependent on the skills and the values of the child and his or her family.

Talent development in the arts occurs in rural communities (Aamidor & Spicker, 1995; Clark & Zimmerman, 2001). Listening to National Public Radio (NPR) and the rural highlights for *Prairie Home Companion* provides evidence for talent. Garrison Keiler spotlights rural talent of youth in a segment called, “Talent from Towns less than Two Thousand.” The talent showcased is truly remarkable and is nurtured far from urban centers. Often such talent development occurs because of a local resident who is willing to provide lessons and work with students who express interest or potential in the arts. The children and youth did not need to be formally identified as gifted in order to express their talent area. We can generalize this message as the ability of rural schools and communities believing that the diagnosis of gifted does not need to precede the appropriate educational services provided. That is not to say that identification and development of talent should not occur. On the contrary, it can be the most crucial factor in getting advanced or accelerated services (Cross & Dixon, 1998; Jones & Southern, 1992; Spicker, 1992).

**Participation in School Activities**

Individuals who attend a rural school often report that they were able to participate in multiple sports, performing or literary arts, and leadership activities. Rural schools may lament that the same students are relied on to do more than one activity (Martin-Reynolds & Reynolds, 1990). This can be viewed as another strength of rural schools because of the collaboration it requires among school personnel. There are multiple ways to conceptualize collaboration in and out of school. Within the school, there are various relationships that can creatively develop perspectives to identify appropriate school program linkages (Montgomery, 2001) for gifted learners. These associations might be professionals or assistants in general and special education, rural and gifted education, the reading teacher and the science teacher, teacher and administrator, or others. All need to communicate and collaborate to meet educational needs of gifted students. Questions to promote unique linkages might be, “What special projects, guest speakers, differentiated curriculum normally occurring in other classrooms, courses, or programs can be modified for gifted learners?” For example, in one rural project for gifted learners, a large career fair was linked to more than one other project. This linkage allowed extensive college information to be offered to students who may not otherwise have had the opportunity.
Beyond school collaboration is the connection to community organizations or service learning projects that are situated in community. Service learning projects promote social and emotional development of gifted learners as they plan with various agencies ways to work together to meet needs. For example, students might be coordinating a plan with residents of assisted care centers on how to solve a local traffic problem, or beautify an intersection, or advertise a special event.

**Making It Happen**

A plan of action is needed to renew interest in making sure gifted students have the curriculum through programs that promote talent development, personal learning characteristics, such as initiative, and community involvement. A beginning point is to collect information on the strengths of rural areas and gifted education. The Connie Belin and Jacqueline N. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development at The University of Iowa demonstrates its specialized interest in the needs of gifted learners attending rural schools with research and conferences. They provide training to teachers and administrators on practices that respond to gifted learners. Participants learn about the strengths of rural areas and apply the information to their own school district and community.

On a local level, start by conducting a needs assessment with a broad net, looking for specialized skills and thoughtful connections. As this assessment defines the potential services that already exist, several pieces of data are important to note. Consider the program or project evaluation data, curriculum modification techniques and methods, research of best practices for gifted learners, and a match of what is to what ought to be. Some suggestions are as listed.

- What do we have available (public library with links, historical society, museums, artists, musicians, folk art or music, cultural dances)?
- Where is our fame (festivals, awards, harvests, tourism focus, historical points)?
- How can students be invited (electives, special interest groups, after school meetings, activity clubs)?
- Who especially needs the invitation or encouragement to participate (ability, potential, need)?
- Who is wearing the “Double Hat” (school personnel carrying multiple responsibilities, such as adult sponsors, grant directors, special program coordinators, community involvement, special talent)? How might these people assist in identification of talent or service delivery with what they already do?
- How will we document successes (list of students, list of possibilities, descriptions of outcome)?

As connections are made in the school and community with teachers and students, a practice of trial placement relies less on the linear sequence of identification of the gifted, placement in program options, diagnosis of individual needs, and assurance that educational services all effectively differentiated. These stages can be accomplished in a different order by finding student need and community options. In states that have strict criteria for mandates of identification, rural areas will have to be creative with the timeline for implementation. However, the students who maximize their potential by participation in some programs may not qualify for additional state funding that is dependent on traditional test scores. The motivation for providing needed activities and services to students who will benefit from them should not be solely based on qualifying for funding. It may require a broader perspective to think of student development and growth, especially in the times of dire financial needs often faced by rural districts.

**Conclusion**

Gifted students may spend much of their school time waiting for others to finish their work. They may be told to find something to do while the rest of the class catches up. Responsive to such needs, the people in the education departments located in the capitol city of our states and the administrative staffs of large, populated urban districts are devising ways to resolve the problems of their brightest students underachieving or even failing or dropping out of school. The deep, reflective, and meaningful conversations and research about what is needed to provide for all students yield policy and suggested practices to find out who these learners are and provide programs to prevent underachievement. These vast policy strategies and massive assessment strategies result in a disconnect to the reality of the diverse educational needs in the rural areas of their state. Accommodating the diversity, state education agencies must enact processes for schools to work with communities as they learn to recognize talent among its youth. Creative use of resources can serve as educational tools to build initiative among the talented youth of our rural communities.
References


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