

Exploring Gifted Education Program and Practice in Rural Appalachia

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The literature on rural gifted programs is growing, but understandings of programmatic features and the teachers within the gifted programs in rural Appalachia are still largely underdeveloped. Through an exploratory case study of three rural Appalachian gifted programs, this study provides a glimpse into their organizational structures and the teachers' experiences and perceptions. The illustrative findings indicate that teachers utilized their resources and knowledge to manufacture their gifted curricula and expressed competing narratives of place and globality. Also, misassumptions and unsupported practices in this rural place negatively influenced teacher retention. Implications and future steps are addressed.

Keywords: rural education, Appalachia, gifted education, place, curriculum

Educational experiences are qualitatively different for students in rural Appalachia than for their urban and suburban peers, partially due to cultural uniqueness (Howley et al., 2009; Stambaugh & Wood, 2015; Winter, 2013). According to the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC, 2019a), educators are responsible for implementing a "culturally relevant curriculum" in response to the needs of students with gifts and talents that is grounded in theory and research. However, few gifted education models are specifically developed for children in rural communities (Lewis, 2015). Additionally, efforts of rural gifted education teachers to meet the needs of their high-ability students are often thwarted by inequities inherent in rural communities, such as low levels of funding, resources, and time devoted to gifted education (Azano et al., 2014; Kettler et al., 2015).

Researchers in gifted education have considered these cultural contexts and increased efforts to support teachers and create accessible and effective gifted services for rural gifted students

(Azano et al., 2014, 2017; Azano & Stewart, 2016; Miller, 2019; Pendarvis & Wood, 2009). The literature on rural gifted programs is growing, but understandings of programmatic features and the teachers within gifted programs in rural Appalachia are still largely underdeveloped. Although rural Appalachia is not a monolithic representation of all rural places, neither is it an exceptional representation. Exploring gifted education within rural Appalachia provides nuanced and contextual understanding of teachers and programs in rural places.

Literature Review

This study is grounded in literature related to the intersection of gifted education, rurality, and notions of place and place-based practices. First, literature pertinent to case contexts is presented independently, including conceptions of rurality, giftedness, and gifted education service models. Then, we explore the intersection of these common constructs related to the educational experiences of teachers and students in rural communities,

including gifted education access and placed-based practices.

What Is “Rurality”?

The National Center for Education Statistics (2006) delineates an urban-centric system that differentiates rural areas by their proximity to larger urban centers, including *fringe*, *distant*, and *remote*. Rurality, however, is more than a place. Rurality is a culture, and “culture is an active process of meaning making” (Street, 1993, p. 25). Rural cultures within places vary based on such circumstances as history, economy, politics, location, and people (Azano et al., 2017; Green & Corbett, 2013; Rasheed, 2020). Therefore, contextual and nuanced descriptions that illustrate places and people transgress the static rural oneness across places and time and create an open and pluralistic conception of *ruralities* (Green & Corbett, 2013; Rasheed, 2020) develop a truer picture of a rural place and people than delineations of geographic location.

Although there are subtle differences among cultures in rural places, there is also a sharedness best described by Richards and Stambaugh (2015) as a rural essence that weaves through people’s sense of place, value of tradition, family, religion, and notions of success. Illustratively, notions of success for youth in rural places are interwoven with narratives of globality (Carr & Kafalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007; Staunton & Jaffee, 2014) and collectivism (Gore et al., 2011; Jones, 1994; Richards & Stambaugh, 2015). *Globality* is the mobility between and among places for educational, monetary, and social gain. For example, rural youth are often socially and institutionally encouraged to leave their rural places for success elsewhere, known as outmigration (Carr & Kafalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007). Global success narratives therefore often diverge from rural collectivist cultural narratives that emphasize proximity to family (Corbett, 2007; Staunton & Jaffee, 2014), generational local employment (Corbett, 2007), and quality of personal, familial, and community character as a statute of success (Jones, 1994).

A “focused and relevant discussion” (Richards & Stambaugh, 2015, p. 3) of these cultural essences creates productive understandings of

sharedness but also illuminates divergences of essences in place and people. Therefore, the rural place examined in this case study is not representative of all ruralities but instead provides a contextual, illustrative, and temporal picture of a specific rural Appalachian place and people.

What Is “Giftedness”?

Defining giftedness is as complex and nuanced as defining rurality. Definitions of gifted and talented students by the U.S. Department of Education (US DoEd, 1993) and the NAGC (2019a) both include performance comparisons between children of the same chronological age, experience, and environment; note the need for educational interventions to support students with high academic ability; and include the caveat that giftedness occurs across cultures and economic strata. The NAGC definition extends that of the US DoEd by acknowledging multipotentiality, twice exceptionality, and social and emotional well-being as special needs requiring intervention.

Whereas these well-used definitions commonly inform policy, social constructions of giftedness, such as Renzulli’s (1978) three-ring conception of giftedness, commonly inform practice. Renzulli asserted that gifted behaviors occur at the intersection of three clusters of interacting traits, task commitment, creativity, and above average ability, which are equal contributors enabling gifted behaviors.

Of note, high-ability students in rural communities remain a culturally underrepresented group in gifted education programs despite inclusivity statements in both commonly adapted definitions of giftedness from the US Department of Education and NAGC and common social constructions of giftedness as behaviors beyond IQ. Reasons for this include institutional and cultural barriers to gifted education identification.

Access to Gifted Education

Students in rural communities are often underidentified for gifted education services (Azano et al., 2017; Pendarvis & Wood, 2009). West Virginia, the location for this study, is a largely rural Appalachian state with pervasive portions of poverty (Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity, 2020) and

has one of the lowest gifted identification rates in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). Potential contributors to underidentification include overreliance on intelligence test scores and lack of teacher training in gifted education. For example, Matthews and Shaunessy (2010) found that students were denied entrance to a gifted program based on a single test score even when district identification criteria included multiple assessments. Moreover, verbal measures on intelligence (IQ) tests, which value formal vernacular and verbal acquisition, are biased against underserved populations (Tyler-Wood & Carri, 1993), such as rural students who may not experience this type of pedantically academic exposure in their homes.

Lack of teacher training in gifted education that includes how to recognize academically talented students from traditionally underrepresented populations also contributes to the underidentification of gifted students in rural communities (NAGC, n.d.-b.). Most states do not include preservice coursework specific to academically gifted students for teachers within initial certification programs (NAGC & Council of State Directors of Programs for the Gifted [CSDPG], 2015). West Virginia requires a gifted education endorsement in addition to initial teacher certification; however, this endorsement requires only a passing score on the Praxis II Gifted Education Exam (Educational Testing Service, 2019), with no additional gifted education coursework (West Virginia Department of Education, 2019b). The Praxis II is a test designed to measure a candidate's "knowledge, skills, and abilities . . . necessary for safe and effective practice" (Educational Testing Service, 2019, p. 5), but Gimbert and Chesley (2009) found "no statistically significant relationship" between the Praxis core assessment and subsequent teacher performance (p. 49).

Once in practice, teachers in rural communities are less likely to receive robust professional learning opportunities specific to their academically talented students' needs (Fraser-Seeto et al., 2015; Miller, 2019). Untrained teachers typically rely on traditional ideals of giftedness as measured by verbal acquisitions, academic achievement, and

work ethic (Peterson & Margolin, 1997). Since rural Appalachian gifted students are more likely to demonstrate strengths out of class rather than in class and are less likely to perform well on tests, participate in class, or put forth effort on assignments (Floyd et al., 2011), both teachers' and administrators' traditional ideals of giftedness also contribute to underservice and underidentification (Azano et al., 2017).

Service Models in Gifted Education

Because there are no federal mandates for gifted education programs and curricula, these programs vary widely across both states and districts within states (Callahan et al., 2017; NAGC & CSDPG, 2015; Siegle et al., 2017). In fact, 12 states currently have no requirements for interventions specific to gifted and talented students (Davidson Institute, n.d.). States that do have gifted education programs, however, typically provide services and interventions designed to accelerate and enrich participating students (Renzulli & Reis, 2014; Siegle et al., 2017). *Acceleration* is "a strategy of progressing through education at rates faster or ages younger than the norm" (NAGC, n.d.-a, para. 2). *Enrichment* refers to "activities that add or go beyond the existing curriculum" (para. 24) and can occur either inclusively in the regular education classroom or in pull-out programs. Pull-out programs are the predominant approach to gifted education at the elementary school level (Callahan et al., 2017; Siegle et al., 2017). Evidence-based enrichment program models, such as the Renzulli's (1977) Enrichment Triad Model, have been shown to mitigate underachievement (Baum et al., 1995) and increase students' self-efficacy (Burns, 1990), goal valuation (Brigandi et al., 2016), and academic achievement (Baum, 1988). Enrichment programs that are not evidence based, however, are frequently criticized for being neither challenging nor meaningful. For example, Borland (2012) described enrichment as commonly consisting of a "hodge-podge" of curricula that lacks scope and sequence.

Intersecting Teachers, Place, and Gifted Curricula

Gifted education and rurality have long been researched individually. Thus, frameworks for gifted

education in general are not designed explicitly for rural places and often do not address the complex contextual nature of rural gifted programs, including the needs of rural gifted education teachers and their talented students (Azano et al., 2014; Lewis, 2015; Paul & Seward, 2016). More recently, scholars have been exploring the contextual, place-specific curricular needs of rural gifted students, including considerations for the teachers responsible for delivering culturally relevant content. Teachers, however, may not be pedagogically positioned to incorporate a culturally comprehensive and critical approach into curricula without explicit rural place-sensitive learning opportunities (Azano, 2011; Azano et al., 2017; Miller, 2019). Therefore, scholars propose incorporating place-sensitive curricula and pedagogy in teacher education and professional learning opportunities to support teachers who practice in rural areas (Azano & Stewart, 2015, 2016; Howley & Howley, 2005; Hudson & Hudson, 2008; White & Reid, 2008).

Moreover, scholars have recently developed and implemented advanced and integrated model-based curricula in rural communities. These models enable teachers to implement a place pedagogy that respects rural talented students' academic as well as contextually placed needs (Azano et al., 2017; Miller, 2019; Paul & Seward, 2016). Empirical evidence suggests that place-based practices (a) encourage a tangible alignment to students as individuals in place, (b) position students as change agents, and (c) foster affective growth (Miller, 2019); (d) support exploration of challenges affecting rural people and places (Kuehl, 2020); (e) allow for an expanded understanding of place (Bass, 2019); and (f) heighten teachers' reflexive practice (Azano et al., 2017; Miller, 2019). This current and increasing attention to the needs of rural talented students aligns with the *Pre-K–Grade 12 Gifted Education Programming Standards*, which asserts that educators are responsible for developing “activities that match each student’s developmental level and culture-based learning needs” (NAGC, 2019b, p. 1).

Summary

Expansive theoretical and empirical literature exists on gifted education and rural places. Scholars

are now increasingly focusing on the intersection of gifted programs in rural places (e.g., Stambaugh & Wood, 2015). Much of the literature illustrates inequities of these rural gifted education programs, such as underidentification (Azano et al., 2017; Pendarvis & Wood, 2009), access (Floyd et al., 2011), professional learning disparities (Fraser-Seeto et al., 2015; Miller, 2019), and teacher underpreparedness to teach in rural places (e.g., Azano & Stewart, 2015). By situating this study in rural Appalachia, this study contributes to understanding gifted programs in this specific place and the perceptions and practices of teachers of these programs.

Methods

While this study was exploratory in nature, the intersectionality of place, culture, and gifted curricula framed the design and analysis. Places are pedagogical, and “places shape us” (Greenwood, 2011, p. 634). We understand curricula and classrooms not as isolated but as inevitably intersecting with the narratives and discourses of place, which include teachers' and students' identities, values, and lived experiences in political and ecological structures (Gruenewald, 2003). Therefore, this research explored the organizational structures and teachers' perceptions and practices in gifted education in a specific rural Appalachian place.

We chose an exploratory case study design because limited literature exists on the phenomena and a case study design allows phenomena to be studied within the context with minimal researcher manipulation (Yin, 2018). The following questions guided the research:

1. How are gifted programs structured and organized in two school districts in rural Appalachia?
2. How do teachers of gifted programs in two districts perceive and experience gifted education in a particular rural Appalachian place?

Participants and Settings

Gifted education teachers across two school districts in rural Appalachia were conveniently

sampled (Patton, 2002) based on proximity to us. Recruitment letters, emails, and phone calls were made to nine gifted education teachers. Three teachers agreed to participate in the study, representing both rural school districts. Although the two districts were neighbors, one was considerably more sparsely populated: the population between the two counties differed by only about 300 residents, but county 1 had 83 persons per square mile while county 2 had only 36 persons per square mile (National Association of Counties, 2017).

The three participants were all White females in their twenties who were either from the area where they were teaching or from a neighboring county (see Table 1). In other words, all participants were from Appalachia and teaching close to home, which is characteristic in some rural places (Corbett, 2007). All participants had three or fewer years of total teaching experience and two or fewer years' experience teaching gifted students. Teachers 1 and 3 both taught in small schools in county 1 serving students in grades pre-K to 4, with total student enrollments of 149 and 120 students, respectively. Teacher 2 taught in county 2 and serviced four different elementary schools across that district, each with enrollments ranging from 75 to 417 students. Due to high percentages of students financially eligible for free or reduced meals (65% in county 1 and 68% in county 2), most schools in the study qualified for the Community

Eligibility Provision, an income-based program where every student eats school meals at no cost (West Virginia Department of Education, 2019a).

Data Collection

Data were gathered over a period of one month through semistructured interviews, observations, and collection of lesson plans. Each participant was interviewed twice, with interviews ranging from 21 to 65 minutes in length. Protocol questions were designed to elucidate structural and curricular details of the teachers' practices, as well as their conceptions of giftedness, success, and the local culture. Examples of protocol questions are "Describe a typical class on a typical day in your gifted program" and "Please describe what has contributed to the success of your gifted program" (see Appendix A)

Interview data were initially analyzed during the collection phase (Yin, 2018) to allow a deeper understanding of the case and promote design reflexivity and data manageability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Saldaña, 2011). For example, after analysis of one of the first teacher interviews, it was clear that in one of the interview questions the term *culturally relevant* inhibited the teacher's ability to answer the question. Because analysis began immediately, we were able to clarify the term and include a follow-up question during the second interview.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	No. Schools Served	Job Title	No. Gifted and Talented Students	Overall Teaching Experience	Credentials	Geographic Origin
Teacher 1	1	Gifted and special educator	3	<1 year	None	Near teaching location
Teacher 2	4	Gifted teacher	21	3 years	Gifted endorsement (4 classes)	Same as teaching location
Teacher 3	1	Gifted and special educator	4	2 years	Gifted endorsement (Praxis)	Near teaching location

Each teacher was also observed twice by the first researcher and a secondary observer for reliability purposes using the Classroom Observation Scales–Revised (COS-R; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2003). The observation protocol scaled general and differentiated teaching behaviors on a 4-point scale: not observed, ineffective, somewhat effective, and effective. For example, the categories assessed for differentiated teaching behaviors included accommodations for individual differences, problem solving, critical thinking strategies, creative thinking strategies, and research strategies. Following the advice of VanTassel-Baska et al. (2003), the observers met with each other after each observation to “reach consensus on the teacher . . . observation scales” (p. 2). This was done within 3 hours after each observation to ensure clarity (Emerson et al., 2011). Observational field notes were also taken by both observers that described the physical classroom, curricular happenings, interactions between and among students and teacher, and any other items of note.

The teachers’ lesson plans were also collected as secondary data sources. Teachers were not given directives on what type of lesson plan to submit. One teacher submitted her weekly working document lesson plan, another submitted two lessons that addressed one individual student’s gifted education goal, and the third submitted an exemplar unit plan. Lesson plans were analyzed specifically for curricular content, use of materials, evidence of gifted frameworks, and culturally relevant, place-based inclusion in the curriculum. These data were then used to support or negate findings from analysis of interview and observation data, increasing reliability of the study findings.

After completion of data collection, because of the exploratory nature of the research, data were analyzed inductively (Saldaña, 2015), but with rural place-specific a priori (i.e., culturally relevant) codes. The first researcher began by transcribing all interviews personally to create a deep familiarity with the data (Seidman, 2013). Inductive codes were added and analytical notes bracketed. During the second and third readings of the data, codes were subsumed, eliminated, or reworded. A codebook (see Appendix B) was then created to

define and organize codes. A discrepancy between the first and second authors’ coding illuminated a “double-coding” issue. The codebook was altered to provide more specific descriptions of the codes in question to eliminate this in future coding. The final interrater reliability was 93%, and data were coded again using deductive codes from the codebook. Preliminarily, data were shared at a research gala, and feedback informed our decision to include analysis of affective understandings, particularly teacher curricular self-efficacy. The category and code specific to self-efficacy were added post hoc (see Appendix B).

Measures were taken during the design, data collection, and analysis phases to ensure rigor of design. For example, the collection and analysis of interviews, observations, and documents provided methods triangulation (Patton, 2002; Shenton, 2004), the use of multiple observers during classroom observations ensured investigator triangulation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2002), and having multiple coders supported analyst triangulation (Patton, 2002). These measures supported trustworthiness of the study findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

Findings were aligned with the two overarching research questions that guided the study. Themes that emerged to create a picture of the structure and organization of rural Appalachian gifted education programs (research question 1) were teacher preparation and credentials, service models, and various roles and responsibilities. Themes that emerged that explored teachers’ perceptions and experiences (research question 2) were diverse perceptions of giftedness and markers of success, narratives of self-efficacy, self-created curricula, and support for an improved practice. Each theme is discussed below in turn.

Creating a Picture of Rural Appalachian Gifted Programs: Organizational Structures

Teacher Preparation and Credentials

Similar to other rural teachers in low-enrollment schools (Monk, 2007), all teachers in this study expressed having two or fewer years’ experience teaching students with gifts and talents. Even with

certification by Praxis, and in one case coursework, teacher participants still felt they were performing in roles for which they did not have the necessary credentials (Ross et al., 1999).

Teacher 2 was the only teacher who reported having coursework in gifted education, a predictable finding based on West Virginia's certification through Praxis (NAGC & CSDPG, 2015; West Virginia Department of Education, 2019b). Teacher 2 expressed that she did not believe taking Praxis II alone was enough to adequately qualify her as a gifted teacher:

In the state of West Virginia, you can take a Praxis test to get certified in your area without taking classes. I could have done that back in May, but I chose not to. I wanted to take the classes to make myself better qualified. (interview 1 [I1])

Teacher 1 also indicated her intent to better qualify herself as a gifted teacher by taking coursework specific to gifted education: "I am on an out-of-field permit right now for gifted education. I've enrolled, through WVU [West Virginia University], for the gifted program, the graduate program. And I'm going to take the Praxis in March for gifted" (I1).

Teacher 2, however, felt unprepared to teach in her small rural pull-out program even after completing gifted education coursework to increase her pedagogical knowledge and better her practice: "I didn't find a lot of the strategies or the practices that we went over in my classes were going to be very beneficial to me here because they are meant for larger groups . . . so I don't think it really fits here in this area" (I1); "I don't feel my gifted college classes really prepared me for a small pull-out program" (I2). Teacher 2's sense of disconnect between her college classes and school-based practices indicate a misalignment between the strategies she learned in her classes and the interests and needs of her rural and low-socioeconomic-status students within her programmatic structure.

Designated Service Models for Academically Gifted Students

All three teachers utilized a pull-out enrichment service model (Callahan et al., 2017; Siegle et al., 2017), where students were "pulled out" from their general education environment for specialized, small-group services in the gifted classroom. Teacher 2 appreciated the pull-out model:

I think the pull-out program really gets them [students] that one-on-one attention because with our classrooms the way they are now so much time is focused on those kids that are struggling. It is and there are no ifs, ands, or buts, about that. (I1)

Teachers 1 and 3 had scheduling times that were consistent across groups, with weekly service times ranging from 60 to 90 minutes (Callahan et al., 2017): "Third and fourth grade . . . [sessions are] three times a week for 30 minutes and the first graders is two times a week for 30 minutes" (teacher 3 [T3], I1).

Teacher 2, who served students in several different schools across the district, reported large variances in student service times that ranged from 20 minutes a month to 120 minutes a week, depending on the school and the grade. She noted that her efforts to increase service times were often thwarted by administrators who made decisions regarding gifted education organizational structures, who prioritized mundane duties over gifted education: "This year I tried to up that to 120 minutes a week, but my one principal thought it was more important for me to do lunch duty, so I had to cut that back" (I1).

The time allotted for homogeneous grouping in the gifted education classroom was minimal (Callahan et al., 2017). This may have resulted from low prioritization of gifted services, which is particularly prevalent in rural and high-poverty schools with limited resources and competing priorities. Mandates matter, but so do perceptions of the need for gifted education services (Brown et al., 2006).

Various Roles and Responsibilities

The notion that gifted teachers have “complex and demanding teaching loads” (Azano et al., 2014, p. 95) proved accurate for these rural gifted education teachers in West Virginia. Teacher 2 was itinerant and traveled to four different schools within the week, often taking away from instructional time: “It’s about 15 and a half miles from here. It takes about a half an hour to drive. It’s a very windy road” (I1).

Teachers 1 and 3 had teaching responsibilities in addition to being gifted education teachers, a common occurrence in small rural schools, sometimes referred to as “Gifted AND_____” (Azano et al., 2014; Croft, 2015; Hammer et al., 2005; Miller, 2019). These teachers described their roles as being responsible for all students with exceptionalities, not only the academically gifted. They taught “all the grade levels that qualify for special education” (T3, I1). Teacher 1 also provided support services for the “lowest 25% of students in the school” not identified in special education (I1).

The various roles and responsibilities that the teachers experienced often overlapped in practice. For example, teacher 3 enacted her pull-out gifted services simultaneously with her pull-out services for students with learning disabilities.

I have a third-grade [special education] math group. . . . I have the gifted third and fourth graders with them. And I have . . . first-grade [gifted students] that join my fourth-grade [special education] reading group . . . but like for my first graders, they do a lot of the same work that the fourth-grade learning disability students would do. (I1)

Classroom observations indicated that teacher 3 had “to divide attention between the two groups [gifted and special education], and physically moved” between the two groups and across the room throughout the duration of the observation (observation 1 [OB1]). Academically gifted students benefit from homogeneous grouping with peers of like ability (Preckel et al., 2019), but in this rural Appalachian place the pull-out model had to be reenvisioned to meet scheduling restrictions and a large caseload.

Teachers’ Experiences and Perceptions in Rural Gifted Programs

As mentioned above, salient themes of teachers’ experiences and perceptions that emerged from the data were diverse perceptions of giftedness and markers of success, self-created curricula, narratives of self-efficacy, and support for an improved practice.

Diverse Perceptions of Giftedness and Markers of Success

All three teacher participants described identification measures of the districts as being largely based on IQ and academic achievement (Callahan et al., 2017):

I usually tell them [families] that it [IQ] averages a 100 and then most of these kids are close to around 130, at least. And they also have one area where they are achieving really high, too. . . . I know some places it’s [identification] more focused on any kind of talent that you might have, but in West Virginia we usually just go with the reading and math and academic excellence. (T3, I1)

In addition, the three teachers also acknowledged that giftedness existed beyond IQ and academic achievement. For example, teacher 1 noted domain-specific ability as an indicator of giftedness, including “somebody that’s really talented like with music or art or one of those areas” (I1). Teacher 3 postulated that a student might possess “strengths inside and not be able to function in school because of things going on at home, or maybe the low SES [socioeconomic status] status . . . might keep that student from showing a high achievement” (I1) and thus from being identified. Nevertheless, she also noted positives associated with the current identification process, in that identified students were provided a level of support under inclusion in special education: “I think it’s good. I think it’s nice because [gifted education] will be covered under special education and . . . [gifted students] are going to stay [identified] gifted [over time]” (I1).

Teacher 2 more overtly problematized her state’s restrictive identification methods and indicated her displeasure with the ambiguity:

There is no set definition for giftedness. Giftedness is a lot of times in the eye of the beholder. . . . Kids can be gifted in so many different ways, and more often than not those different ways aren't looked at. Their academic performance is the only identifying factor, and I hate that. (I1)

Teacher 2's expanded conception of giftedness was evidenced in her narratives and also in her lesson plans. She submitted a social studies unit designed on Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. The unit was originally developed for a university course on giftedness she participated in the previous year; however, she used portions of the unit with her middle school gifted class.

Just as the teachers fluctuated between conceptions of giftedness, they also fluctuated between rural, locally normed and global or dominant conceptions of success. Teacher 1 described success for academically gifted youth as "the amount of money they make . . . a job that is viewed as, I guess, high status like doctor, lawyer, those kind of things" (I1). All three teachers referenced a college education as a marker of future success for their students: "I'd be happy if I heard that that student got to . . . pursue higher education" (T3, I2).

Teacher 2, who was the only teacher from the rural place where she worked, illustrated how changes within her rural community were altering her traditional notions of rural success, positing that success was not "going down the wrong path" or just "making it out of town" (I2). In a very pointed quote, she illustrated her meanings:

I think opinions of what success is, is different. . . . I grew up here, not necessarily for the better, but things are different now. . . . I know around this area there are a lot of children who graduate from school, and, you know, they enter a path that's not healthy. We've actually had several [past] students that have passed away due to drugs. . . . Some people it's [success] just making it through one day at a time. (I2)

Teacher 3 also noted mobility and outmigration as a measure of success for students with high

academic ability: "Just because you live over here doesn't mean you're going to stay here; you might go on to . . . anywhere" (I1).

In contrast, the teachers also talked about students being happy in their future careers, giving examples of vocational-technical lead jobs, such as being a mechanic, and discussed family as a standard of success: "The skills to raise a family and you know be able to pursue the kind of job they want to do, whether it's through a vo-tech type school . . ." (T3, I2). Teacher 1 perceived a parent would potentially boast about their adult gifted child with dominant conceptions of success but also include familial standards "like marriage or kids or those kinds of things" (I2). These placed notions of success align with traditional rural values and the desire for a good life.

Narratives of Self-Efficacy

The teachers' noviceness and alternate forms of certification affected their self-efficacy in aspects of gifted education and meeting their rural talented students' needs. Knowledgeable and prepared teachers tend to have higher self-efficacy, and teacher self-efficacy is a mediating factor in successful teaching (Dixon et al., 2014; Zee & Koomen, 2016). The teachers in this study interspersed low self-efficacy phrases into their interview narratives: "I don't have a whole lot of experience teaching gifted yet so . . ." (T3, I2); "I haven't taught students that long or been involved with gifted that long" (T2, I2); and "I wasn't really prepared for the gifted aspect of teaching in August," "I'm not quite sure, 'cause I'm still so new," and "I'm not fully comfortable with teaching the gifted . . . I'm not fully qualified, like, I didn't have any kind of training in it" (T1, I1).

Novice teachers (Klassen & Chiu, 2010) and teachers who work in out-of-field designations (Ross et al., 1999), like the teachers in this study, are often more at risk for lower self-efficacy. This is pertinent because low self-efficacy has been attributed to decreased job satisfaction, increased stress, and teacher burnout (Zee & Koomen, 2016).

Self-Created Curricula

Nationally, two-thirds of gifted programs are locally mandated to implement an adopted

framework or model, and one-half of gifted programs use gifted programming standards (Callahan et al., 2017). In this study, neither programmatic standards nor research-based gifted curriculum models were mandated or delineated by state or local educational agencies. Instead, teacher participants created their own curricula. The teachers chose what content to teach, when, and for what duration. Teacher 1 said her content was “a lot of the STEM activities, so I try and incorporate them all. . . . We haven’t done a whole lot of Math currently, but mostly reading and science” (I1). The other teachers also had a choice and fluidity of use between curriculum contents: “We do a lot with science and hands-on and social studies and geography” (T2, I2).

Moreover, all teachers enacted their practice with considerations of appropriate-level activities and a curriculum that was interesting for the students. Interest is positively associated with motivation (e.g., Weber, 2003), and achievement motivation is a predictor of academic achievement (e.g., Robbins et al., 2004). Teachers’ intents of creating “fun” and “interesting” programs (T1, I1, I2; T2, I1, I2; T3, I1) were noted in observed classroom activities, such as creating magnetic slime or building a catapult (T2, OB1; T3, lesson plan, OB2). Teacher 2 claimed, “I try and go a lot based on what things they [students] want to know, do things they want to do and will be fun and keep them engaged. I want it to be fun and exciting” (I1).

Additionally, teacher expectations are linked to student performance (Brophy, 1986), and the teachers in this study attempted to create a “challenging” curriculum for their students. For “most of them everything it’s easy for them in their classroom, so a little challenge for them—I wanted them to be challenged” (T1, I1). For example, third-grade students in teacher 3’s class were not just building catapults for fun; they also engaged in research, critical thinking, and problem-solving techniques by exploring Newton’s three laws of motion through various media (lesson plan, OB2). As noted in the observation protocols (COS-R; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2003), teachers relied heavily on incorporating activities to apply new knowledge, encouraging students to express thoughts, using independent and group learning to

promote depth in understanding content, and including certain critical thinking activities to meet their curricular goals. Conversely, data from the observation protocol also indicated that the use of creative thinking strategies as a form of differentiation, interest, and challenge in the curriculum was not present in these teachers’ practices. This finding is counter to other research that indicates creative thinking strategies were the “most developed skills instruction offered to gifted students . . . at the elementary school level” (Callahan et al., 2017, p. 35; see also Siegle et al., 2017).

Similar to gifted teachers nationally, the teachers in this study relied on a variety of premade curricular materials in their programs (Callahan et al., 2017), acquired from socioeducational sites and online educational programs: “I normally use Pinterest or Teachers Pay Teachers, just because they are already readymade materials” (T1, I1). Teachers also used online educational programs in their curricula for student learning, including Prodigy, IXL, Reading Eggspress, and Khan Academy. In fact, in five of the six observations, students were using technology, specifically computers and tablets (all except T2, OB2). The teachers leaned heavily on these online resources as access to curricula. Yet, teachers’ uncritical readings of these socioeducational sites, specifically the teacher sharing sites, inhibited their evaluations of the quality of the content and its meaningfulness for their rural students. As Gallagher et al. (2019) noted, “If teachers care about engaging students in curriculum and pedagogy that is multicultural and justice-oriented, then they must adopt a filter to help assess what resources, activities, and ideas they bring into the classroom from sharing sites” (p. 217). Even without a critical reading of the sites and activities, though, the teachers’ creation of their own curricula became arduous at times:

I mean I spend so much time during the day and even in the evenings just looking for activities or researching. . . . I have to do everything and find every activity we’re going to do. You know it’s making sure we have the resources. And a lot of times I have to buy things on my own. For this magnet slime I

bought everything, but it's trying to find things to do that will last long and so. (T2, I1)

Despite teachers' efforts to create effective programs, the curriculum lacked cohesiveness as well as scope and sequence (Borland, 2012), which resulted in what one teacher referred to as a curricular "free-for-all" (T1, I1). Teacher 2 also commented on the lack of cohesiveness: "There's some days when I'm flying by the seat of my pants and just figuring something out. I try my hardest to get stuff structured" (I1). Observational data indicated that teachers attempted to accommodate individual differences, employed problem-solving opportunities and research-based techniques, and engaged students in various critical thinking strategies, but teachers' impromptu approaches to curricula resulted in these strategies being only "somewhat effective" (COS-R; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2003). These findings could be attributed to teachers' inconsideration of the need for a comprehensive, culturally relevant curriculum combined with a lack of time, knowledge, and support to create such a curriculum.

Supports for Improved Practice

All teachers expressed either having or wanting to have support, collaboration, and professional learning opportunities to improve their practice. For example, teacher 3 attributed the success of her program to the support she received from her principal and cooperating teachers:

I think is good is that my principal is very involved with all the kids and she is interested in getting the kids tested if she thinks they might . . . be gifted. She just doesn't say, "Oh yeah, we'll worry about that later." She's interested in them. . . . So, I think that's the best thing that we've got going for us right now for our gifted program. (I2)

A reciprocal relationship of support also occurred with parents of identified students. For example, when teacher 3's gifted education position was considered for potential elimination for fiscal reasons, her support came from community stakeholders: "My position as a gifted teacher has been cut. I had several parents step up. They called board members and wrote letters. Very helpful" (I1).

Teachers also noted gaps in systemic and curricular support. Teacher 3 felt her principal was very involved with the identification of gifted children but noted that support at the district level was less consistent: "There needs to be a little more leadership from the special education department" (I2). Teacher 2 also felt there was minimal support at the district level. When she tried to address the extremely low gifted referral and identification rates in her area, she recalled receiving no support for her advocacy: "I've had several ideas I've taken to our special education director about, you know, how to get kids in the program and . . . nothing" (I1).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, and similar to other rural teachers, the gifted teachers also reported feelings of isolation (Azano et al., 2014; Burton et al., 2013): "The other gifted teacher from the other end of the county, we don't always get time to talk or communicate and see what each other is doing or try and bounce ideas off each other" (T2, I1). When asked what she would change about the gifted education program, teacher 3 said that she would like to have "ways that we can connect more with other gifted education teachers and collaborate more would be a good idea" (I1).

Each teacher also expressed the need for more curricular guidance to improve their practice:

I think maybe a little more like guidance in to where, what we should be teaching them. 'Cause right now it's kind of like a free-for-all. You just kind of pick and choose, so maybe a more structured curriculum or curriculum materials, that would be helpful. (T1, I1)

Teacher 3 posited that training in gifted identification and education needed to be extended to all teachers because gifted students spend most of their time in the general classroom:

I think it would be good if there was a little bit more training for the general education teachers and the special education teachers . . . because they're the ones that are doing a lot of the work with the gifted kids during the day and they're also the ones that are going to be identifying. They need to be knowing what to look for. (I1)

The teachers' narratives indicated that support for their gifted programs were present through various means. Pertinently, though, the teachers also conceptualized contextual and relevant support structures that currently did not exist but were needed for their own gifted programs and practices in this rural Appalachian place.

Discussion

The findings of this study support previous research and provide important context to existing gifted and rural literature. Our findings suggest that teachers manufactured their gifted curricula despite and among place-based inequities and demonstrated competing narratives of place and globality that limited a purposeful inclusion of culturally relevant curricula. In addition, as we later learned, the structural misassumptions and unsupported practices negatively influenced teacher attrition.

Manufacturing the Gifted Curriculum

The teachers in this study were confronted with various contextual challenges and barriers within their practice. For example, they came to gifted education without knowledge or training in gifted pedagogy or gifted curricula, nor did their schools and districts provide curricular guidance or in-service learning specific to the needs of gifted learners once in practice (Burton et al., 2013; Fraser-Seeto et al., 2015). The structure and staffing of the schools inhibited collaboration with other gifted teachers (Azano et al., 2014; Burton et al., 2013), and they were tasked with multiple roles such as being "Gifted AND ____" teachers (Azano et al., 2014; Croft, 2015; Miller, 2019).

Despite these challenges and barriers, the gifted teachers in this study did their best with the knowledge and resources they had to manufacture their own programs and curricula that fit their temporal, contextual, and perceptual needs of their rural gifted students. They utilized accessible resources for both curricular ideas and activities (e.g., technology), their ideals and goals for gifted programming (e.g., challenging), and their understanding of giftedness and success to create a space for their gifted students to engage and learn.

Competing Narratives of Place, and Globality

All teachers in this study were from the rural region, but not necessarily the place, where they taught. Interestingly, teachers' disparate ideals of success for their gifted students in the future alternated between materialistic ethics and wanting their students to live well in their rural community (Howley et al., 1997; Richards & Stambaugh, 2015). Teachers' narratives acknowledged place-based ideals of success, such as local employment, family, and a general enjoyment of life, but these ideals were secondary to dominant conceptions of success, including education, acquisition, outmigration, and career status (Howley & Howley, 2005; Richards & Stambaugh, 2015). This finding mirrored other research that points to education's influence on outmigration of rural youth (Carr & Kefalas, 2009) and rural youth's conflicts between leaving their rural homes for career and educational opportunities and their deep sense of place and family priorities (Staunton & Jaffee, 2014). Additionally, teachers conceived ideals of giftedness beyond schoolhouse notions (Renzulli & Reis, 2014) but did not comprehensively engage these ideals in their curricular practice. Moreover, the findings of this study indicate that, despite rural scholars' call for incorporating place-sensitive pedagogy in teacher education and student curricula (Azano & Stewart, 2015, 2016; Howley & Howley, 2005; Hudson & Hudson, 2008; White & Reid, 2008), neither was evidenced in this rural Appalachian place. As teacher 3 concluded, her higher educational learning in gifted education was inapplicable in her small rural program, and all the teachers' curricula were decontextualized from the places and culture in which they were enacted.

In conclusion, the teachers in this study were neither conceptually nor pedagogically positioned, at this point in their practice, to create culturally relevant narratives in their curricula that either took advantage of the place's potential positive possibilities or challenged existing inequities.

Misassumptions and Unsupported Practices Negatively Influenced Teacher Attrition

In contrast to the rural literature (Burton et al., 2013), the findings of this study indicated teacher participants were willing and wanting professional

learning opportunities to improve their practice. The state's procedure of credentialing teachers through Praxis wrongly assumed that a teacher's conceptual knowledge of gifted education equates to quality curricular practice (Gimbert & Chesley, 2009). Instead, teachers' knowledge of gifted-education best practices does not directly correlate with their use (Bain et al., 2003). For example, gifted curricular frameworks were evident in lesson plan data but sparsely used in practice. The referenced theories and models were used as contained lessons instead of comprehensive standards of practice. Teachers of gifted students may be knowledgeable of research-based gifted models, but when the models are not applicable in their rural classrooms among the challenges and barriers, knowledge of the gifted models is moot. Moreover, disconnected and minimal preservice and in-service curricular support also attributed to the teachers' low-self efficacy in meeting the needs of their rural gifted students. The teachers felt isolated, unsupported, and uncomfortable in their own practice.

Recognizing these inefficiencies, the teachers conceptualized ideals of preparation, collaboration, and support that would allow them to navigate and succeed within complexities of their situations, which unfortunately were not realized for these teachers. In the 2.5 years between data collection and composing this report, all three teacher participants had left the field of gifted education—although they remained in the rural area as teachers. Risk factors for teacher burnout, such as multiple roles and responsibilities (Azano et al., 2014; Croft, 2015; Hammer et al., 2005), alternate routes to certification (Miller, 2019), low self-efficacy (Zee & Koomen, 2016), and unfulfilled calls for support within their curricula and practice (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017), are assumed to be contributing factors to these teacher participants' departure from gifted education.

Implications and Next Steps

This study illuminated structural organizations of gifted programs and gifted teachers' perceptions and experiences within a rural Appalachian place, a perspective that is largely absent in rural gifted literature. In addition, this study provides context to

the rural literature, as it focused on a specific subgroup of rural teachers and their programs. Also, it adds to the gifted literature because this study provides context to national conceptions (e.g., Callahan et al., 2017) and highlights the special populations represented by rural programs, in contrast to how the field of gifted education often homogeneously views these populations.

With the general undervaluing of gifted education in this particular place (Miller, 2019) and the concerning ad hoc approach to curricula and instruction, an additional question emerged from this exploratory study: how beneficial were teachers' curricula and instruction for rural gifted students? Future research and applicable practice should build a conceptual foundation of gifted pedagogy for teachers specific to rural places that allows them to succeed within the complexities of their positions, support students' cultural placed needs, and create curricula that are rooted in gifted-education best practices for meaningful and longitudinal learning. Bottom-up professional learning opportunities that address teachers' contextual and temporal needs and provide opportunities to collaborate, potentially via virtual platforms, are the most obvious avenues to meet these goals.

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