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Rural Teachers' Experiences with a Place-Based Gifted Curriculum: A Case Study

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This qualitative case study examined teachers' experiences with a language arts curriculum implemented with gifted students in a high-poverty rural school district. The study focused on one rural Appalachian school district where 16 elementary teachers working in eight schools implemented a place-based language arts curriculum designed for third- and fourth-grade students identified as gifted. Data sources included fidelity logs, classroom observations, questionnaires, and an interview. Drawn from analytic induction and thematic coding, findings suggest that existing barriers in rural schools can influence curricular implementation and can impede students from accessing the curriculum in its entirety. Insights from this case study offer implications for practitioners, administrators, policymakers, community members, and researchers to mitigate instructional challenges and increase students' access to place-based gifted curriculum.
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***Keywords*: rural, gifted, place-based, case study, rural gifted education, critical pedagogy of place**

Giftedness occurs across all populations, and gifted programs offer enrichment opportunities for students to develop skills and talents beyond what the general curriculum provides. However, rural students are often not provided gifted services because their school does not have funding or resources for gifted education, which is not bound by a federal mandate (Kuehl et al., 2022; A. Howley et al., 2003; Floyd et al., 2011; Lewis & Boswell, 2020; Miller & Brigandi, 2020). In fact, the 2023 *Why Rural Matters Report* highlighted the startling fact that "of the 24,736 public rural schools in the United States, 10,071 (40.7%) appear not to offer any program specific to gifted students" (Showalter et al., 2023, p. 4). Hence, many rural gifted students do not have access to curricular or enrichment opportunities typical of gifted programs elsewhere, either within

the classroom or outside it (e.g., field trips to art exhibits, music concerts, science museums, or theater performances).

While school funding priorities are typically beyond the purview of teachers, it is teachers who work to meet the needs of their students every day. Therefore, understandings about teachers' experiences with curriculum and instructional implementation are essential for informed decision-making about what works to support rural gifted students. In this article, we describe a bound qualitative case study conducted to bring about an understanding of teachers' experiences and interactions with a rural place-based language arts curriculum designed for gifted third- and fourth-grade students. The focus of the study was one rural Appalachian school district (Hutton County, a pseudonym) and 16 teachers across 8 schools within the district who implemented the curriculum. The following research questions were addressed:

- How did teachers in a high-poverty rural district experience and interact with a place-based language arts curriculum designed for gifted students?
- How do the teachers characterize these experiences?
- What can teachers' experiences and perceptions teach us about the place-based curriculum and opportunities for gifted learners in rural communities experiencing poverty?

Literature Review

Definitions of rural are complex, in flux, and variant (Grant et al., 2024; Longhurst, 2021). Rural understandings are more than geographic location, more than fictionalized idyllic living, and far more than disparaging stereotypes of countryfolk accustomed to rudimentary lifeways. Yet too often, rural representations in entertainment, news, and even government policies construct a monolith where degeneration and despair beget negative imaginings. As with other stereotypes, the images construed inaccurately portray the realities and complexities of all things rural—including the people who reside there. To counter these stereotypes and move toward positive change, Biddle and colleagues (2019) called for significant and just research in rural spaces to yield integrative and potentially transferable understandings of rural contexts for inclusive

contributions to the broader field of education, and the 2022–2027 National Rural Education Association Research Agenda (2022) echoes and affirms this call.

Rural salience in education research is more than geographical grid work where populations are sparse and locations remote; rather, understanding "the essence of rural" is necessary to find ways to effectively serve students in rural settings (Biddle et al., 2019; Coladarci, 2007; Richards & Stambaugh, 2015, p. 3). Educators, policymakers, and researchers who recognize these contextual differences are better positioned to realize specific supports for various unique rural needs (Azano et al., 2025; Hamilton et al., 2008) and to strive for equity in rural education and not just for alternatives to metrocentric educational programming and policies (Eppley et al., 2018).

Rural Gifted Education

Rural gifted programming is essential for fostering the potential of advanced students, yet due to funding constraints, many rural schools only test students who have been referred by parents or teachers (whereas more resource-rich districts often administer universal screenings for all students; Callahan et al., 2022; National Association for Gifted Children, n.d.; Plucker & Callahan, 2014; Plucker & Peters, 2018). Consequently, qualified students—particularly students of color and economically disadvantaged students—tend to be overlooked (Callahan, 2005; Card & Giuliano, 2016; C. Floyd, 2023; Gray & Gentry, 2024; Hemmler et al., 2022; Kuehl et al., 2025; Pendarvis & Wood, 2009; Peters, 2022; Peters & Engerrand, 2016; Showalter et al, 2023). Often, identification of gifted students is based on standardized test scores using national norms, resulting in few identified students in rural areas (Callahan et al., 2022; Rasheed, 2020; Renzulli, 2002a, 2002b). As Reis and Renzulli (1982) contended decades ago, "traditional identification procedures... are certainly excluding large numbers of above-average pupils who, given the opportunity, are [equally] capable" (p. 620).

Education researchers have illuminated a number of additional challenges hindering rural gifted students from reaching their full potential, including the difficulty of implementing gifted instruction in rural schools given limited resources and geographic complications (Job & Babchuk, 2022; Jung et al., 2022; Miller & Brigandi, 2020). Howley and colleagues (2009) examined years of research, finding that "declining population,

persistent poverty, changing demographics, and ongoing accountability requirements" (p. 515) were factors adversely affecting rural gifted education. In many places, rural gifted students are encouraged to seek "higher" aspirations outside of their rural communities and, ultimately, to leave for more urban or suburban areas (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007; A. Howley et al., 2003; Sherman & Sage, 2011). Yet the rural community as a whole stands to benefit when gifted students develop critical thinking skills that better position them for the viable alternative of "contributing as leaders to their own communities" (A. Howley et al., 2003, p. 515), which is made possible through gifted programming that attends to the unique contexts of rural communities.

Place in the Curriculum

Curriculum is a point of inquiry for scholars working to better serve rural gifted students (e.g., Azano et al., 2017; Azano & Callahan, 2021; Kuehl et al., 2020; Kuehl et al., 2022; Kuehl & Azano, 2023) and advance the specialized field. Place-based education is a forward-thinking approach that honors and incorporates elements of community, landscape, language, and lifeworlds (C. Howley, 2003). Here, *lifeworld* encompasses the multitude of influences and complexities which exist in rural communities. Place-based education has roots in environmental education with tenets of sustainability and community viability and can be applied across content areas and grade levels (Jacobs, 2011; Smith & Sobel, 2010). Place has the potential to garner students' attention in the classroom and make meaningful curricular connections to their lives outside of the classroom (Bass & Azano, 2024; Bangert & Brooke, 2003; Smith, 2002). Not only is it possible to make the curriculum more relevant to the students' past and present: when place is specifically part of the curricula, there are opportunities for connections between the students' futures and the future of their rural communities (Azano, 2011; Corbett, 2007; McInerney et al., 2011).

Theoretical Framework

The current educational era is dominated by standardized practices that allow for the quantification of learning in ways that make it possible to doling out rewards and punishments for schools and students who do and do not perform in expected ways (Au,

2023). “In place of actual experience with the phenomenal world, educators are handed, and largely accept, the mandates of a standardized, ‘placeless’ curriculum and settle for the abstractions and simulations of classroom learning…[that] limits, devalues, and distorts local geographic experience” (Greenwood[1], 2003, p. 8). Deconstructing the power and privilege of hierarchical, imposed standards-based curricula (e.g., Eppley, 2011; Eppley et al., 2018) through place-based initiatives allows for empowerment and sustainability of rural communities (Azano, 2011; Azano et al., 2019; Greenwood, 2003).

A critical pedagogy of place (Greenwood, 2003), which merges critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) and place-based education (e.g., Smith, 2002; Smith & Sobel, 2012), serves as the theoretical framework for the case study. In his foundational article on the subject, Greenwood argued that place-based education in practice tended to neglect critical considerations such as interrogating educational power structures and the need for collective action towards positive change. Likewise, he posited that critical pedagogy failed to fully recognize the “spatial, geographical, and contextual dimension(s)” (p. 4) of learning, especially as they relate to rural and ecological challenges. As such, Greenwood offered a critical pedagogy of place to advocate for the grounding of instruction in local contexts while also helping students consider how places are historically, socially, politically, and culturally positioned in ways that marginalize and exploit vulnerable populations. “If place-based educators seek to connect place with self and community,” he wrote, “they must identify and confront the ways that power works through places to limit the possibilities for human and non-human others. Their place-based pedagogy must, in other words, be critical” (p. 7).

The curriculum examined in this study was designed to align with a critical pedagogy of place in the way it centered place-based learning and embedded frequent prompts for students to think critically about social justice issues related to rural stereotypes and opportunities (Azano & Callahan, 2021). Correspondingly, a critical pedagogy of place provided a viable platform to negotiate curricular access and equity for rural gifted students in this study. Specifically, the research methods and analysis conducted focused on “the lived experiences of place [which] puts culture in context,

[1] Previously used the last name Gruenewald.

demonstrates the interconnection of culture and environment, and provides a locally relevant pathway for multidisciplinary inquiry and democratic participation" (Greenwood & Smith, 2010, p. 148).

Methods

Promoting PLACE

The curriculum examined is part of Promoting PLACE (Place, Literacy, Achievement, Community, and Engagement) in Rural Schools, a six-year U.S. Department of Education grant funded through the Jacob K. Javits Foundation. Co-authors Carolyn and Amy created Promoting PLACE to increase access and opportunities for rural gifted students by (a) implementing a multiple-data-point identification process based on universal screening processes utilizing local norms to identify students with high ability in the domain of language arts and (b) creating and implementing a high-quality, place-based language arts enrichment curriculum. The larger sample for the Promoting PLACE grant included 14 rural districts (seven treatment and seven control) in Virginia and Kentucky. A total of 578 students and 144 teachers participated.

Place-Based Language Arts Enrichment Curriculum

The Challenge Leading to Engagement, Achievement, and Results (CLEAR) curriculum is a comprehensive approach to gifted instruction based on proven models of depth and complexity (Kaplan, 2005), differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2001), and the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (Renzulli & Reis, 1985). For the larger study (Azano et al., 2017; Azano & Callahan, 2021), researchers adapted the CLEAR curriculum (Callahan et al., 2015) to emphasize place and rurality with the aim of engaging students and providing local context for the learning objectives. The curriculum consisted of four units: Poetry and Folklore for third grade and Fiction and Research for fourth grade. Place connections were embedded using resources reflecting unique aspects of the region (e.g., districts located on the eastern shore of Virginia studied poems about the sea while those located in the Blue Ridge Mountains read and analyzed poems about mountains).

Some lessons focused specifically on challenging rural stereotypes and expanding students' notions about what it means to be part of a rural community.

Each unit consisted of 16 to 20 lessons (designed for 45-minute time blocks) to be implemented over the course of a semester. All four units aligned with state standards, allowing teachers to cover the expected grade level curriculum while providing increased rigor to meet the specific needs of advanced learners. Participating teachers in the treatment districts received professional development designed to explain the overarching goals of the grant; outline the curriculum background and research framework; review the content of the language arts units; demonstrate lessons; offer instructional guidance and support for implementation; and address concerns and questions. Because of the unique service delivery models of the gifted programs across the school districts, implementation of the curriculum varied greatly among treatment districts, with some teachers teaching 1–2 lessons weekly in pullout groups and others implementing daily with all students, including those who were not identified as gifted.

Case Study Context

Hutton County was selected as the purposeful research sample for this case study because of its unique geographic location and specific education challenges (e.g., high rate of poverty, population decline, and resource limitations). Boundedness of this case study was unique in that Hutton County is literally bound geographically as a narrow, low-lying valley spanning 466 square miles nestled between rivers and bookended by towering mountain peaks in excess of 4,000 feet above sea level. Traveling to the nearest city with a population over 10,000 requires an hour-long drive through national forests.

Just over 26,500 people lived in Hutton County in 2019, or roughly a third fewer than its 1940 population, when the coal mining industry provided ample opportunities for employment. Nearly 96% of Hutton's population self-identifies as White, 2% as Black, and 2% Hispanic/Latino or combined race. According to 2018 U.S. Census Bureau data, the median income for individual households in Hutton County was just above $24,000 (as compared with the national median of $68,000), with more than 41% of the total population living below the poverty level. Nearly one-third of Hutton County adults over age 25 did not graduate from high school. Underemployment, joblessness, opioid

addiction, and access to healthcare impact Hutton County, and their ripple effects are reflected in the schools and manifest as education challenges. Yet, even as the root causes of these pervasive concerns can be connected to oppressive state and federal policies across generations, few political resources are dedicated to reversing their deleterious impacts.

Hutton County is also a community where parents and teachers care deeply about students, with some teachers juggling multiple roles and others coming out of retirement to fill teaching gaps. School and community pride is evident through the district's recently built high school, where people gather for Friday night football games and seasonal theatre productions. Laden with history, the county is one where traditions of bootlegging, coal mining, folk music, poke sallet festivals, and sorghum stir-offs are rooted. Nestled deep in the Appalachian Mountains, amid rich cultural influences, Hutton County is a storied place, and it is *this* place, its past and present, which brought us to this research.

Curriculum Implementation

Hutton County teachers implemented the rural, place-based language arts curriculum with third- and fourth-graders over two consecutive years. In Hutton County, general education teachers (n = 16) implemented the curriculum with gifted students, primarily in heterogeneous (mixed ability) classrooms. This meant teachers used the place-based curriculum with all students or split their classes, separating those identified as gifted from those not identified as gifted, often teaching two entirely different lessons within one classroom space. A full-time gifted education coordinator supported teachers serving gifted students and acted as a liaison between the district and Promoting PLACE staff.

Researcher as Instrument

This study rested on the assumption inherent to qualitative case study research "that meaning is embedded in people's experiences and . . . mediated through the investigator's own perceptions" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). As primary investigator for this study and member of the Promoting PLACE grant team for two years prior to the study, Michelle served as a "trusted broker" (Azano & Downey, in progress) in the researcher–

participant relationship. The level of relationship-building and trust needed for qualitative studies in general is particularly important in isolated rural spaces where people may feel more reserved about welcoming newcomers to observe and potentially critique their practices. Michelle came to this research from her own rural background, having been a first-generation college student from a farming community in rural Virginia. Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, Michelle received continual support and feedback from Amy and Carolyn, co-primary investigators of Promoting PLACE who were also raised in rural communities, and Rachelle, a fellow graduate assistant deeply familiar with the grant who served as a peer reviewer throughout the study.

Data Collection

In this descriptive, heuristic, and particularistic case study (Merriam, 1998), teachers' experiences and perceptions made up the "unit of analysis" within "one particular program" (Merriam, 2002, p. 8)—the Promoting PLACE curriculum. Table 1 illustrates the four phases of "rigorous data collection" (Creswell et al., 2007, p. 248) and describes the sources of evidence and methods of ensuring trustworthiness for each phase.

Table 1

Four Phases of Data Collection

	***N*=**	**Source of Evidence**	**Description**	**Method of Ensuring Trustworthiness**
Phase One	409	Fidelity Logs	For each lesson, teachers completed a checklist containing all instructional steps; they provided brief explanations for adaptations/omissions made	Analytic memos

Phase Two	12[2]	Observer Checklist and Notes	Observers used the same checklist of instructional steps; they noted adaptations/omissions and recorded field notes	Multiple observers/interviewers (Michelle and two colleagues); Member checks with teachers
		Debriefing Session Transcripts	10–20 minutes following observations; observers asked specific follow-up questions about students' prior knowledge, perceived strengths and weaknesses of the lesson, and specific challenges experienced	
Phase Three	9[3]	Online Questionnaires	Open-ended questions about teachers' experiences with the curriculum; emailed to all 16 participants	Questions reviewed by dissertation committee
Phase Four	1	Interview Transcript	Semi-structured cognitive interview (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Deismone & Le Floch, 2004) with one participant (Ms. Ellis); conducted via telephone; recorded and transcribed	Pilot interviews conducted prior to this one; peer review of questions

We examined Hutton County teachers' experiences and interactions with the curriculum using two data sources from the original grant: teachers' self-reported fidelity logs (*n* = 409) and observation documents (observer logs, field notes, and debriefing session transcripts, *n* = 12), the majority of which Michelle collected in her role as research assistant. We collected additional data specific to this study: teacher

[2] Included three observations per semester across four semesters; not all teacher participants were observed, and some teachers were observed multiple times.
[3] The timing of our request (in 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 lockdown) likely contributed to our lower-than-expected response rate.

questionnaires (*n* = 9) and a subsequent teacher interview. The use of multiple data sources allowed for data triangulation, which "decreases, negates or counterbalances the deficiencies of a single strategy, thereby increasing the scope for interpreting the findings" (Cronin, 2014, p. 26).

Data Analysis

The four phases of inductive analysis (i.e., working "from the particular to the general," Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 16) of multiple data sources offered opportunities for "contextualized deep understanding[s]" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 105) of teachers' experiences and interactions with a unique rural gifted curriculum. With continual feedback and support from each of her co-authors, Michelle read, reread, inferentially coded, and organized data in the process of analytic induction (Erickson, 1985), looking for recurring words or phrases to generate thematic findings, especially those that related to place and criticality, given the study's intention to examine "the relationship between education and the politics of economic development," which Greenwood (2003, p. 3) highlighted as a guiding principle of a critical pedagogy of place. She repeated the process through multiple iterations, then unified the themes that became our two assertions.

Trustworthiness

The interplay among content, context, social construction of realities, and meanings were dynamic and overlapping within this study. With support from our theoretical framework, Michelle described, analyzed, and interpreted understandings about teachers' experiences with the place-based language arts curriculum using member checks, reflexivity, and memos (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to increase truth value (Krefting, 1991). She also used "peer review or debriefing" as a means for "review of the data and research process by someone who is familiar with the research or the phenomenon being explored" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129), in this case, Amy, Carolyn, and Rachelle.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding (Merriam, 2009) of teachers' experiences and interactions with a specially designed place-based curriculum for gifted learners in a unique rural context. This case study has "local relevance" (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2006, p. 101) and provides understandings about how rural gifted curriculum and instruction might mitigate opportunity gaps for gifted students in marginalized rural communities, as well as how, in some cases, entrenched geographic and socioeconomic challenges may continue to impede students' access to educational opportunities. In this section, we describe two key assertions (Erickson, 1985) that emerged from the data and describe how these assertions respond to our research questions. In this section, we show how multiple sources—labeled throughout as FL (fidelity logs), OD (observation documents), Q (questionnaires), and I (interview)—offer evidentiary warrants for each assertion.

Assertion 1: Structural Barriers Influence Teachers' Experiences with the Curriculum

Teachers' implementation of the curriculum was impeded by a variety of structural barriers, or "obstacles that collectively affect a group disproportionately and perpetuate or maintain stark disparities in outcomes" (Simms et al., 2015, p. v), such as time constraints, limited availability of instructional materials, and lack of suitable academic space. These challenges were associated with students' level of access to the curriculum in that when instructional activities were modified or omitted because of them, students' opportunities for enrichment were minimized or compromised altogether.

Teachers' self-reported fidelity logs showed that adaptations were made in 85% of the lessons across the four units, the majority of which were brought about because of time constraints, material shortages, physical environment constraints, and instructional support limitations, whereby teachers resorted to "skipp[ing] big chunks" and "picking and choosing" activities from the curriculum. Rationale for teachers' selections of which activities to include or exclude were not noted in the data sources, and while modifications to the curriculum could potentially have been for the better (e.g., if the teachers had shared an anecdote about an experience in the local community to help the students

make real-world connections), omissions of activities meant students missed out on needed enrichment and activities that would potentially have contributed to greater cohesion of learning and integration of place.

Time Constraints Prevent Teachers from Delivering the Full Curriculum

A prevalent sentiment about the challenges of time was evident across the district; accountability concerns imposed upon teachers through state and federal requirements compounded these challenges. During the Folklore unit, a teacher noted, "multiple interruptions and programs at school this time of year" (FL) in her explanation for having completed only 50% of the folklore lessons; of the eight implemented lessons, she cut seven short citing time infringements. Another teacher stated there was "not enough time to do it along with everything else we are required to teach with the . . . standards. I had to adjust most lessons" (Q).

Frequently, when teachers implemented the curriculum in a whole group setting, they scaffolded lessons by filling in gaps in background knowledge to support all students' understanding of concepts, including those not identified for gifted services. For example, when teaching abstract concepts such as rhythm, rhyme, and cliché in the Poetry unit, a teacher noted that "students really struggled" (FL), so she supplemented with videos and examples to increase their understanding of these unfamiliar concepts. Citing the time it took for scaffolding in the whole group setting, she did not complete lessons with her identified-gifted students.

Ms. Ellis, a general education teacher, delivered instruction to her gifted students while her other students worked on separate learning activities in the computer lab. Looping with her students for two sequential years, she taught the third-grade curriculum in Year One and the fourth-grade curriculum in Year Two. In our interview, when asked about the nature of modifications made to the curriculum, Ms. Ellis expressed concerns about time constraints. She stated, "I had to really take a lot of things out" (I). With "30 minutes once a week, maybe twice a week on a good week" designated for gifted instruction, the logistics of moving her general education students to the computer lab and then getting gifted "kids back to [her] room to do the curriculum" resulted in lost instruction time and omission of activities (I). Ms. Ellis expressed frustration with the

situation, stating, “I felt like I was doing [the students] an injustice by just breezing through whatever the lesson was for that day” (I).

Ms. Ellis’s fidelity logs indicated instruction time was lost because of infringements such as standardized testing preparation, evacuation drills, and inclement weather. During each instructional session, Ms. Ellis worked from the beginning of each lesson through as many of the activities as she could, then started at the beginning of the next lesson in her next convening with students. As a result, approximately one-third of each lesson was left incomplete (FL), with omitted activities situated near the end of each lesson, meaning that students often missed culminating activities (e.g., creating a poetry anthology with students’ original work). This was the case for the majority of teachers who reported cutting portions of activities out of instruction, and the same pattern continued with all of the units Ms. Ellis attempted to complete during the two years she worked with the same group of students (Poetry, Folklore, and Fiction; she was unable to get to the Research unit at all because of time constraints).

Resource Shortages Prevent Teachers from Delivering the Full Curriculum

Whether tangible or intangible, the unavailability of resources interfered with the implementation of the curriculum and students’ opportunities to access it. As is the case for many districts in rural areas experiencing poverty (Azano et al., 2017), resource limitations for instructional materials in Hutton County present a consistent challenge to instruction that their better-funded suburban counterparts are less likely to face. Across all eight schools, teachers noted resource shortages such as teaching supplies (e.g., books, folders, notebooks, maps) and instructional supports (e.g., computers, internet).

Resource Limitations with Basic Classroom Supplies. At the onset of each year of Promoting PLACE, teachers were supplied with instructional materials, including journals, notebooks, pens, sticky notes, and various other items for use in teaching the four units. Additional supplies were delivered by grant staff on visits to schools when teachers requested particular items, yet teachers still noted resource shortages beyond what the grant provided (FL). For example, when activities for the Poetry and Research units required additional materials, one teacher noted, “no magazines or newspapers

readily available," and marked incomplete for activities in both the Poetry and Research units (FL). In another instance, a teacher reported there was "no board in the room" to use for whole group activities, so students had to "write on tables" in small groups instead (FL). Another teacher cited resource limitations (FL) as reasons for cutting instructional steps in 13 out of 15 attempted Folklore lessons and omitting the last two lessons of the unit altogether. Additionally, half of the teachers in the study taught the curriculum to their entire classes, meaning they taught students at a variety of ability levels across general, special, and gifted education. The addition of students not identified by the grant often resulted in material resource limitations that affected implementation. These types of resource shortfalls were noted across all units and in each of the eight schools. (It is not clear whether the teachers who saw the lack of supplies as a barrier to instruction reached out to grant personnel for their specific needs, but it was our practice to provide supplies when teachers asked for them.)

Resource Limitations with Technologies. Some lessons required students to use computers, but computer labs, typically only one per school in the district, were often unavailable for gifted instruction because the lab schedule prioritized whole-class use. Additionally, outdated equipment, slow internet connections, marked interruptions with Wi-Fi services, absence of internet, and broken equipment (e.g., unusable keyboards, monitors, and smart boards) were consistent technological hurdles (FL, OD) that precluded students' full access to the curriculum.

Resource Limitations with Books. Several times in the Folklore unit, teachers are directed to visit the school library with their students to read supplemental folktales beyond those offered in the curriculum, which were to serve as models for students to write their own tales as the unit's culminating activity. In one instance, a teacher took her students to the school library as directed in the lesson, only to find there were no folktale books in the small library collection (FL). This scarcity of folktale books was consistent across the district, and while accessing folktales online may have been an option in some schools, other schools' internet connections were so inconsistent that e-books were only accessible for intermittent periods, if at all.

Resource Limitations of Physical Environment. The Fiction unit's Writing Retreats were specific place-based activities designed to provide students with authentic opportunities to write about the world around them, including their own rural communities. During the Writing Retreats, students were to examine pictures of their local communities, talk about sensory details evident in those familiar places, write about their places, and share those ideas with their peers, as writers do. Unfortunately, students were sometimes denied the opportunity to collaborate during the Writing Retreats because, according to one teacher, there was "a space issue that did not allow for this to happen" (FL); another teacher mentioned an inability to move desks for the retreats (teachers did not indicate whether they had considered gathering students together on the floor for these collaborative experiences). Similar incidents of students missing opportunities to interact with the curriculum and with each other because of spatial limitations were noted across the data. A few teachers taught in small, shared spaces or in the back quarter of a classroom, and other teachers borrowed their colleagues' classrooms for gifted instructional space. Dilemmas related to sharing classroom space were noted, such as when teachers could not build word walls meant to display newly learned vocabulary because the areas they taught in were too small or because the walls of the borrowed classrooms were already covered.

Insights About the Prioritization of Gifted Education in Rural Schools

Wanting to learn more about teachers' reasons for adaptations or omissions, we hoped that the teacher interview with Ms. Ellis[4] would yield insights pertaining to how (or if) teachers valued the curriculum as a whole, or particular aspects of it individually. In the interview, Michelle asked, "Do you think [the Promoting PLACE curriculum] contributes to . . . or provides opportunities for learners in the rural communities?" In response, Ms. Ellis stated:

> We just live in a district where it's the basics. We strictly have the basics in elementary. You know, this was a great thing for our elementary kids because this

[4] We had hoped to conduct interviews with several teachers, but the demands of online emergency teaching during the pandemic precluded other teachers from agreeing to participate.

> group [gifted students] they don't get the recognition and they don't get the special time just for them to have the enrichment. (I)

During the interview conversation, Ms. Ellis talked about her daughter's experiences with the Hutton County gifted program. She said, "I'd say she was pulled out less than ten times from the time she was in third grade to the time she was in ninth grade" (I). Ms. Ellis indicated that gifted services had been inconsistent historically and "a problem for sure…So, this [using the Promoting PLACE curriculum] was at least something" (I), even though the 30 minutes per week allotted for gifted instruction was not enough to implement the curriculum as designed.

Throughout the interview, Ms. Ellis demonstrated a strong commitment to providing gifted students with time, attention, and instruction. She considered the Promoting PLACE curriculum valuable because "it bumped it [teaching fairy tales] up to the next level" and "included things I would've never thought to teach" (I). However, she expressed concerns about the shortcomings of teaching the curriculum lessons in a "hit or miss" fashion (I), stating, "I feel like I did them an injustice by not being able to do it better with them, and they deserve, those kids deserve to have extra things" (I). When faced with implementation challenges, she said, "I just had to learn to pick and choose what I thought I could get in and what they could do by giving them a challenge. They needed the challenge for sure" (I).

The Promoting PLACE grant ended one year prior to the interview with Ms. Ellis, and when asked about whether gifted instruction had continued, she responded, "I'm not 100% sure . . . why we don't have the gifted and talented program like it was" (that is, like it was prior to or during the Promoting PLACE grant; I). When asked about administrative support for gifted services, Ms. Ellis said that "a gifted and talented curriculum coordinator [was appointed] at the school level, [but] I know personally in our school nothing was done . . . there wasn't anything really. If there was, it was hit or miss, here or there, few and far between" (I). Indicative of the structural challenges and need for support, Ms. Ellis posited, "There's been a breakdown in the district" around students' access to gifted instruction (I).

Assertion 2: Teachers' Efforts Influence Curriculum Accessibility

During visits to Hutton County, grant staff observed teachers offering verbal enthusiasm for the curriculum, as when they eagerly participated in discussions of folklore and local oral narratives with their students. Teachers encouraged and supported their students during implementation, bridging gaps by making adjustments to lessons when needed, such as when teachers prompted students to discuss ideas aloud when there wasn't enough time for them to respond in writing to a folktale. In this section, we provide evidence from multiple data sources to demonstrate how students' access to and experiences with the curriculum were contingent upon the extra initiative teachers took to ensure implementation.

Teachers Showed Ingenuity and Enthusiasm

Despite myriad challenges, teachers demonstrated investment in their students and buy-in to the curriculum through efforts such as using their home internet connections and public libraries to search for folktales when none could be found in the school's collection or stapling lined paper together when there weren't enough journals for the whole class. One teacher reported she had "been keeping the students after school to get all the lessons in" (FL), and an observer highlighted this same teacher's efforts to supplement instruction with online videos "to fill in [foundational knowledge] gaps" when her students "didn't have a clue" about the content being taught (OD).

Referencing a lesson in the Research unit, a teacher noted her own excitement for learning. She stated, "I didn't know there could be this much information on any topic ever!" (OD). Another example of teacher enthusiasm was observed when a teacher "[got] the students pumped up to write," by reminding them that the writing was "something that you have been chomping at the bit to do."

Teachers showed enthusiasm about the place-specific lessons, with one teacher incorporating "history books to connect to place" when teaching the Fiction unit (OD). Another teacher noted she and her students "loved" the discussion of stereotypes and slang terms like "hillbillies" and "rednecks" as part of a particular Fiction unit writing activity (FL). She expressed appreciation for a gifted curriculum that afforded her students opportunities to write with their own places and experiences in mind.

Teacher enthusiasm was evident during the Poetry unit as well, with one teacher bringing in her "most favorite poem" to read aloud in class (OD). She also encouraged students to collaborate—to intentionally help each other—when additional examples of abstract nouns were needed to support students' learning in one lesson. Instead of fostering competition among her students, she promoted problem-solving as an authentic, shared learning opportunity.

Teachers Appreciated the Place-Based Curriculum

In her responses to the questionnaire, one teacher expressed appreciation for the curricular tie-ins to the local region that were embedded in the curriculum. She stated,

> We knew from the beginning this would be something our teachers and students would like considering it focused on our hometown and the things that were important here. There was general sense of excitement about having an actual curriculum that teachers could go by and students could benefit from. (Q)

Another teacher valued the place connections: "The curriculum was innovative in that it included information related to the students' home…The students really enjoyed the curriculum and found it valuable. The work was engaging and rigorous in just the right way" (Q).

Teachers expressed enthusiasm for a "new" and "different" curriculum for gifted students, with one teacher remarking, "I am thankful we were allowed to participate in this project. It provided a much-needed re-start to our gifted program" (Q). Another teacher "loved the new material and upper-level skills" (Q), and a third teacher "hated that [the Promoting PLACE curriculum] ended" (Q). Although the Promoting PLACE grant ended after implementation Year Two, the curriculum and all resources provided by the grant remained with the Hutton County school district so that teachers could, if they chose and were allowed to do so by administrators, continue using it.

Challenges Mitigated Teachers' Enthusiasm

Although teacher enthusiasm was evident, teachers also expressed concerns and insights about curriculum challenges. One teacher stated, "I felt like it was good for the students once I had figured out how to manage the time" (Q). Similarly, another teacher

stated, “When I found out that others were having to cut parts of the curriculum out too, I felt better about it. [The curriculum] was great. It was just [a lot] in a short amount of time we have to do it” (Q). While time constraints infringed on students’ engagement with Promoting PLACE activities, teachers tried to implement the units and complete as many steps in the lessons as time permitted. One teacher even “Gave up [her] planning to teach this” (Q), demonstrating an exceptional commitment to the project.

Discussion

When teachers could not complete lessons in their entirety, they reported regret over shortchanging their gifted students. However, successful implementation of gifted programming requires tangible (e.g., materials and technologies) and intangible (e.g., administrative and community support) resources. Although resource challenges influenced curriculum delivery, the challenges themselves did not totally deter teachers of gifted students, who used ingenuity to deliver the lessons to the best of their ability under the specific circumstances in which they worked. In this section, we make sense of our findings in light of the need to strengthen and enhance gifted programming in rural schools.

Systemic Barriers Disadvantage Rural Students in Communities Experiencing Poverty

The Promoting PLACE curriculum was an adaptation of an evidence-based approach for gifted instruction that was “designed around learning goals that are meaningful, important, and clear” (Callahan et al., 2015, p. 144), with earlier reports documenting its success (Azano et al., 2017; Azano & Callahan, 2021; Azano et al., 2021; Bass et al., 2020; Callahan & Azano, 2021; Kuehl et al., 2020; Kuehl et al., 2020). Azano et al. (2017) found the Promoting PLACE curriculum afforded teachers “opportunities to see talent by challenging students to think and to create beyond the parameters of the standard classroom curriculum” (p. 74). Therefore, when instructional barriers caused omissions of activities and whole lessons in Hutton County, students were denied opportunities to be challenged in the same way—to see and experience how these discrete lessons were structured to create authentic student products connected to place,

such as poems, short stories, and research projects. In Hutton County, students missed out on purposeful activities because teachers were impeded from providing students with the full scope and sequence of the curriculum. With known opportunity gaps for rural gifted students (Azano, 2014; Azano et al., 2017; Azano et al., 2019; Callahan et al., 2022; Hemmler et al., 2022; Jung et al., 2022; Plucker, 2013; Rasheed, 2020; Stambaugh & Wood, 2015), students' inability to access the full gifted curriculum because of structural barriers is a matter of equity. Specifically, it denies rural students access to lessons crafted to "address the specificities of the experiences, problems, languages, and histories that communities rely upon to construct a narrative of collective identity and possible transformation" (Greenwood, 2003, pp. 9–10), thereby reinforcing the very inequities Promoting PLACE in Rural Schools aimed to reduce.

Teachers Omitted Lesson Components Placed Near the End of Lessons

Findings suggest that curricula designed for gifted education should be tailored to the specific needs of teachers and students in high-poverty rural communities. In this study, it was notable that teachers generally started at the beginning of a lesson and concluded when the class time ended, rather than reviewing the lessons ahead of time to select its most valuable components. Perhaps a future iteration of this project could offer more guidance for lesson modifications and/or abridged versions of the lessons focusing on the most essential components for teachers who are unable to see students for the length of time needed to complete the unit.

Teachers Lacked Understanding of Alignment with State Standards

Additionally, findings reveal the need to bring about deeper understandings among teachers and school leaders of how gifted instruction does not detract from students' mastery of basic learning standards. As one teacher stated, there was "not enough time to do it along with everything else we are required to teach with the…standards." In another Promoting PLACE case study, Matthews et al. (2021) noted similar resistance from general education teachers when students were pulled out for gifted instruction. The gifted teacher reported a continual need to convince classroom teachers that she was teaching the same skills but at a more advanced level. One classroom teacher was

concerned that the students' absence from regular instruction might reflect poorly on her later on, since her own professional evaluation would be based on her students' scores on the state's end-of-year proficiency exam. The gifted teacher expressed frustration, saying, "There has got to be a better way, because we should not have to sacrifice good [gifted] instruction [because of the] fear factor from the [classroom] teacher" (p. 197).

Although the Promoting PLACE grant team provided professional development illustrating the alignment to the standards, our data suggest that a stronger emphasis was needed to show that delivering the curriculum *was* teaching the standards, and that gifted instruction does not have to conflict with preparing students for standardized tests. While test preparation has been a preoccupation among U.S. schools for decades, it can have especially detrimental impacts for students attending schools at risk for not meeting strict scoring benchmarks, which tend to be located in places like Hutton County with high incidences of poverty (Au, 2023). According to Floyd et al. (2011), test preparation is overemphasized in rural schools, with "an already small pool of resources" (p. 29) being depleted in such efforts. Gifted curriculum is designed to meet a much higher bar than states' basic standards require, and gifted rural students should not be denied access to it because school personnel are worried about negative consequences when students "miss" regular instruction to attend gifted lessons. After all, the standards "serve as a foundation to meet each student's academic needs. They are not intended to limit any child's achievement" (Plucker, 2015, p. 6).

Targeted conversations with school leaders (i.e., gifted coordinators and principals) may be necessary to better equip them to alleviate the pressure teachers feel to forgo gifted lessons in favor of test preparation, because teachers who provide gifted instruction should not have to prove gifted students need high-quality, rigorous instruction. From practitioners to leaders in education, a mindset shift needs to occur in such a way that gifted instruction is prioritized, not relegated to merely an addendum or asterisk in a lesson plan.

Teachers Independently Sought Solutions to Resource Challenges

Teachers' efforts to implement the Promoting PLACE curriculum despite persistent challenges demonstrate how they valued the curriculum and their commitment to meeting

students' needs. These challenges might be mitigated in light of teachers' insights about their experiences. Teachers' perceptions and voices are invaluable resources to inform and shape instructional practices in rural gifted education.

Implications and Contributions to the Field of Rural Gifted Education

Framed by a critical pedagogy of place, which "foregrounds a narrative of local and regional politics that is attuned to the particularities of where people actually live" (Greenwood, 2003, p. 5), this case study centers on "social experience" and "human relationships" of teachers as they implemented a curriculum with their students. Greenwood's theory "challenges all educators to reflect on the relationship between the kind of education they pursue and the kind of places [they] inhabit and leave behind for future generations" (2003, p. 3). Azano & Biddle (2019) noted,

> The rural schoolteacher plays a varied, important, and socially constructed role in rural communities . . . They embody the histories and meanings of place, understand implicit culture and politics, and play a role in the very construction of schooling and influence the value of education. (p. 7)

While the teachers in this study demonstrated a commitment to the type of reflection Greenwood prescribes, it is our contention that administrators, policymakers, and researchers should likewise be tasked with the challenge. That is, while implementation barriers were observed on a local, individual teacher level, the challenges cannot be resolved by teachers alone, or even by the district. Instead, these challenges require a restructuring of how education is funded across the country. Informed policymakers can and should move beyond universal policymaking and, instead, "conceptualize rurality in policy implementation" (Sutherland and Seelig, 2021, p. 107), thereby promulgating institutional, systemic changes to benefit rural gifted students and, by extension, their communities.

Greenwood (2003) further encouraged individuals to "pursue the kind of social action that improves the social and ecological life of places, near and far, now and in the future" (p. 7). If we believe that every child deserves to grow at the rate they are able, it only makes sense to heed Hutton County teachers' understandings of the structural challenges to implementing gifted instruction in rural schools and to use their insights to inform curricular development and implementation. Teachers need support, professional

development (specifically, addressing modifications and omissions of activities in lessons), and, more broadly, training in the areas of gifted student needs as well as appropriate curriculum and instruction for gifted students. In Hutton County, only the gifted coordinator—and none of the 16 teachers—had training in providing gifted instruction prior to their participation in the Promoting PLACE grant.

This study demonstrates that the resource inequities rural schools face are undeniable. Over a two-year period, a team of grant researchers was focused on Hutton County to implement the place-based curriculum. The team provided resources, professional development, and step-by-step lesson plans, yet rural students still faced opportunity gaps because they did not have a deep source of library books, access to computer labs, adequate broadband services, and sufficient learning spaces. These inequities are not only unfair to individual students, but they also disadvantage rural communities. Howley et al. (2009) asserted the benefits of developing critical thinking skills in rural gifted programs as a means for students to better "understand the value of contributing as leaders to their own communities" (p. 515). If more Hutton County students received gifted instruction with full access to curricula centering critical thinking skills, curiosity about the world, and self-confidence, the community would surely benefit. Skills from the Promoting PLACE curriculum, for example, would prepare students to create viable ways to revitalize and sustain their rural communities, so they could choose to live, work, and raise families there.

These exponential benefits may best be realized when rural teachers are supported in their instruction with gifted students and when action is taken to address systemic barriers. The type of action needed is not simply monetary (although funding would be beneficial); it can also be a matter of educating the school community about the needs of gifted students and policies that adversely, even if unintentionally, affect them.

Future Research in Rural Gifted Education: Thoughts for the Field

We offer several observations informed by the Hutton County case study. First, in our work, we observed a fragile system in which gifted education services and programming were sporadic, deprioritized (even if by necessity, in some cases), and very often dependent on the out-of-school efforts of dedicated teachers. To reimagine its full

potential and possibility, gifted education in rural schools would need to be fortified and prioritized. Second, strengthening state mandates and increasing state funding for gifted education, with—perhaps—an eventual push towards instituting a federal mandate, might be natural next steps in the direction of serving the needs of rural students. Third, we observed a distinct need for teacher support through professional development and opportunities for rural teachers to earn certification in gifted instruction. Finally, we believe further studies in gifted education practices in other rural contexts are needed to yield additional understandings.

Conclusion

The Promoting PLACE grant allowed the district to implement a rural-specific gifted curriculum with their students, but in doing so, it revealed pronounced opportunity gaps in gifted services when students' access to the curriculum was compromised. This case study supports the literature about existing opportunity gaps (Azano, 2014; Azano et al., 2017; Azano et al., 2019; Callahan et al., 2023; Hemmler et al., 2022; Jung et al., 2022; Plucker, 2013; Rasheed, 2020; Stambaugh & Wood, 2015) and provides further reason to address needs in rural gifted education with action. Considerations such as time for gifted instruction, resources to complement the curriculum, and support for place-based curricula in the schools are worthwhile investments.

This exploration of teachers' experiences and perceptions responds to Coladarci's (2007) assertion that "assorted inferences about the participants' lives, values, and sense of community" are missing elements in rural research (p. 2). We feel this case study captures the "essence" (Richards & Stambaugh, 2015) of Hutton County's rural gifted classrooms from the perspective of the teachers. Hamilton et al. (2008) contended that each rural region has "specific issues . . . which call for different policies and solutions (pp. 3–4), but some of the challenges noted by Hutton County teachers likely exist in other rural places. Drawing attention to them may lead to collaborative efforts to respond to these challenges, which in turn may increase the likelihood of yielding viable solutions. Through this deep exploration, we have strengthened our resolve to advocate for equitable instruction for advanced students in rural regions, understanding all the more that doing so is imperative for the sustainability of rural communities.

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