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# Gifted Rural Learners: Exploring Power, Place, and Privilege with a Focus on Promising Practices

## An Introduction to Volume 10, Issue 2 of *TPRE*

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This special issue of *Theory & Practice in Rural Education* highlights gifted rural learners; the call sought papers on the concepts of power, place, privilege, or promising practices in the field of gifted rurality. This introductory article provides a brief synopsis of each of the seven peer reviewed articles and an analysis of three principal themes that emerged from the articles: equity, identity, and a sense of place. Additionally, three questions regarding gifted rurality are explored: How does gifted education view equity in the context of rurality? How does intersectionality impact gifted students? How does (or should) gifted education as a field adjust in order to recognize the strengths and assets of our gifted rural students?

***Keywords*:** gifted education, rural education, gifted rural learners, equity, promising practices, place, intersectionality, identity

Teachers know their students cognitively, affectively, and culturally. A significant aspect of cultural identity is geography; your area, your place directly influences who you are (Gollnick & Chinn, 2013). This is strongly evident in rural gifted students. Richards and Stambaugh describe the essence of rural (2015) with characteristics such as a sense of place, a value in tradition, the role of family in the students' lives, the role of religion, and the impact of commercialism and varying definitions of success. Moreover, the pull of home can conflict with the push of opportunity for gifted rural students, as the rural environment may provide challenges to education and access for gifted learners. Researchers identify several challenges to gifted learners in the rural settings as well as promising practices that can encourage learning and growth.

Lewis (2009) considers the challenges to rural gifted students through the lens of three perspectives: students, educators, and community. From the students' points of view, the size of the schools and relative homogeneity can restrict gifted programmatic options, opportunities for rigorous and challenging coursework, and mentorship opportunities and career planning (Lewis, 2009; Mattingly & Shaeffer, 2015). In addition, due to the population density of rural locations and gifted learners' needs for like-minded and like-ability peers, peer relationships are potential challenges. For educators, challenges vary from curriculum materials and technology to monetary resources. Budgets based on per pupil expenditure do not give much room to update texts, computers, and classroom supplies. Scheduling can also be a challenge for teachers in rural schools, requiring constant flexibility in gifted programs, and in middle and high school course offerings. Teacher candidates are not as plentiful in rural districts, and access to professional learning opportunities may be limited (Lewis, 2009; Mattingly & Shaefer, 2015). Community perspectives that can provide challenges to gifted learners in rural locations include a cultural dynamic that is resistant to change, educational expectations that do not

support advanced academic programming, and the changing demographics in rural settings (Lewis, 2009).

Challenges to rural gifted learners increase exponentially when gifted and rural are combined with a third descriptor. Donna Ford describes finding gifted rural Black and Hispanic students like "finding a needle in a haystack" (2015, p. 71). This could be traced to what was once considered a politically correct way of describing students- low-income Black students labeled urban, and low-income White students termed rural (Ford, 2015). Rural, however, does not equate with low-income as you view the rolling hills of Kentucky horse farms, nor does urban fit the perception of economically depressed, under the shade of high-rises on the Upper East Side of New York. Rurality is not homogenous, though this is not to say that poverty is not a challenge to some rural areas. Seventy percent of counties that are considered high child poverty counties are rural, a disproportionality considering 63% of counties are rural. An even higher percentage- 77%- of persistent child poverty counties, marked by at least four decades of high child poverty, are rural counties (Mattingly & Shaefer, 2015). Ford recommends approaching gifted rural education through a multicultural focus: culturally responsive teaching, with components of philosophy, learning environment, curriculum, instruction, and assessment (2015). Thus, as the topic of gifted and rural is researched, an ideal approach, even as we consider themes and understandings across gifted rural populations, is to consider the intersectionality of gifted, rural, and "X". Teaching Tolerance defines intersectionality as "the social, economic and political ways in which identity-based systems of oppression and privilege connect, overlap and influence one another" (Bell, 2015, p. 38). Moreover, rural education can be viewed through a dynamic lens, recognizing the strength in the concepts of place, family, belonging, and tradition.

## Power, Place, Privilege, and Promising Practices: Articles in this Issue

The purpose of this themed issue of *Theory and Practice in Rural Education* is to explore the ideas of power, place, and privilege as they relate to promising practices for gifted learners in rural settings. Rather than casting a deficit view on rural gifted learners, viewing students through the challenges that rurality brings to the table, opening our eyes to the lush familial, cultural, historical, intellectual, and creative resources that the rural place provides its community. Article submissions crossed a variety of topics from analyzing children's literature to specific curricular options to disaggregating AP data, but themes emerged throughout the articles: equity, the power of place, and identity. The first three articles all involve a curricular aspect in language arts: they tie to literature or writing. Two of the three discuss aspects of a Jacob K. Javits grant on place-based curriculum for gifted learners, Promoting PLACE in Rural Schools, while the third is a critical analysis of children's literature about gifted rural figures. The fourth article takes a close look at data disaggregation and nomenclature. The last three articles cluster together in a theme of rural schools in practice, starting with an overview of barriers and facilitators to gifted Black rural students. The final two articles are individual studies, the first a case study of three gifted programs in Rural Appalachia, and the last a reflection on schooling in Rural Texas. As special editor for the issue, in this introductory article it is my distinct honor to provide a brief overview of each of the articles in this special issue, and then comment on the themes that emerged from this issue, with the following three questions explored: how does gifted education view equity in the context of rurality? How does intersectionality impact gifted students, and how does (or should) gifted education as a field adjust in order to recognize the strengths and assets of our gifted rural students?

### A Place for Writing: Examining a Place-Based Curriculum for High-Performing Rural Writers

Erica Bass, Amy Price Azano, and Carolyn Callahan (2020) explore the results of the second cohort of students participating in the Promoting PLACE in Rural Schools Jacob K. Javits grant in the first article of the special issue on gifted rural learners. In an experimental design study, the treatment group of students were engaged with a gifted language arts curriculum that connected to place. In doing so, students both expanded their

writing skills and developed more complex thoughts about place. Bass, Azano, and Callahan share instructional takeaways in how to use the tools of the profession as a common language and in how to make connections to place that support students in their thinking about place and its value.

### Gifted Rural Writers Explore Place in Narrative Fiction Stories

In a second study using data from the Promoting PLACE in Rural Schools grant, Azano and Callahan return with their insights with lead author Rachelle Kuehl. In this article, data is shared from a section of the study in which students describe place in the settings in narrative fiction stories. Authors describe students' connections to place through their rich descriptions of nature, in their explanations of encounters with new surroundings, how they highlighted specific settings, in their depictions of rural communities, and in the topic of displacement (Kuehl et al., 2020).

### Young, Gifted, Black . . . and Country

Jennifer Gallagher and Melissa Wrenn (2020) share the results of a critical content analysis of five children's books in the third article in the gifted rural learner special issue. Each of the contemporary non-fiction books focuses on a historical gifted Black individual that spent at least part of their life in a rural setting. Gallagher and Wrenn noted that in each case, the child's giftedness was not only supported by the community, but also impacted the rural community in a positive way. Additionally, the authors noted themes of giftedness in curiosity, self-direction, and resourcefulness and in intersectionality, specifically race-based discrimination in learning and obstacles of poverty.

### Take Care When Cutting

Michael Thier, Paul Beach, Keith Hollenbeck, and Charles Martinez (2020) discuss five different approaches to analyze rurality and remoteness using the National Center for Education Statistics urbancentric codes, highlighting the need to move beyond the common classification of rural vs. non-rural. The fourth article in our special issue discusses the findings from the data disaggregation process. Based on these findings, Thier and colleagues–provide several recommendations for researchers with regard to policy making in particular.

### Black and Gifted in Rural America

Expanding upon and reexamining a previous publication in our fifth article, Joy Davis, Donna Ford, James Moore III, and Erinn Fears Floyd (2020) explain the challenges facing and the promising practices serving gifted Black rural learners. They then delve into the nature of rural communities, detailing the intellectual, academic, and cultural features that create both challenges and, when seen through a dynamic lens, facilitate growth for Black gifted rural students. The authors close with suggestions in curriculum, research, curriculum, and programs while honing in on access, equity, and excellence.

### Exploring Gifted Education Program and Practice in Rural Appalachia

In the sixth article on rural gifted learners, Myriah Miller and Carla Brigandi (2020) share the findings from a case study of three gifted teachers in rural Appalachia. By exploring the organizational structure of the gifted program as well as the teachers' perceptions, practices, and experiences, the researchers illustrate how the teachers' use of resources and gifted curricula in practice in rural Appalachian classrooms. The authors discuss findings in terms of the concepts of place and in the topic of teacher retention.

### Reflections on Rural Gifted Education in Texas

The final article in the special issue on gifted rural learners speaks to both the challenges and promising practices in gifted rural education from a reflective standpoint. Katie Lewis and Cecelia Boswell (2020) combine a review of school district policies and procedures and group interviews with a reflective analysis from a 30-year veteran of Texas gifted education.

## Themes and Central Questions

Equity, place, and identity emerged as themes throughout this issue, all of these themes have been pervasive in the media of late. Over the last few months, as I read countless racial solidarity statements that begin with "now is the time", I personally wondered: why wasn't it the time before?

Why with George Floyd and Breonna Taylor? Not that I don't appreciate the movement towards social justice, towards equity. But why not with Trayvon Martin? Tamir Rice? I struggled with this as 'the moment', the time when we as a country surpassed critical mass; when we decided that these event(s) were more egregious than the rest. Yesterday was the time. Last year was the time. Five years ago. Ten. An equity advocate and mentor counseled me, "that's well and good, but take 'now' by the horns, and don't let it go". I am proud to stand with organizations such as CEC-TAG that publish not just statements of solidarity, but A Critical Call to Action. And I am grateful for the opportunity to work with the researchers and the work they submitted to the gifted rural learners' special issue of *Theory & Practice in Rural Education*.

As Drs. Gallagher and Wrenn so acknowledged in their article, before I begin with the themes from our special issue, I will start with a positionality statement: I identify as a White, cisgender female, and I recognize the privilege associated with my identity. I identify with an antiracist (Kendi, 2019) and abolitionist teaching (Love, 2019) stance, and like Drs. Gallagher and Wrenn I align myself with equity literacy (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015) as a tool to transform schools. I work in the field of gifted and talented education, and while I identify as an equity advocate and co-conspirator, I also acknowledge that I am on a continual journey in terms of my own knowledge and understanding, and I am intentional about participating in learning experiences so that I can continue to learn and grow.

**Equity**

Race, ethnicity, and equity emerged as a theme in several articles, and what a timely theme it was in the spring, summer, and fall of 2020. In thinking about equity and the power of nomenclature in rurality, Thier et al. state, "we encourage deep thought about geography, so that both research producers and consumers can all know the types of places that studies include or exclude, helping policy makers avoid the creation of winners in some places and losers in others," (2020, p.75). In their critical analysis of children's books, Gallagher and Wrenn noted, "While racism pervaded the lives in the other texts, there were many specific similarities of how racism related to their opportunities to learn" (2020, p. 46). Thier et al. noted that going to school in any particular geographic locale should not by very definition cause access or lack thereof to gifted programs, but it can potentially point to other variables that may hinder such access. They suggested that "researchers can examine causal effects that might lurk behind such labels, yielding interrogation of how community norms and social connectedness might vary based on the salience of rurality and/or remoteness," (2020, p. 76).

**The Power of Place**

Given that two of the articles are specifically focused on place-based curriculum, it is not unusual that place emerged as a theme, however, it is in more than just the two contributions. Lewis and Boswell share that "rural gifted learners manifest their giftedness in different ways based on their lived experiences, which vary from student to student and from one rural community to another" (2020, p. 123). They specifically refer to the Promoting PLACE Javits grant and the use of the CLEAR curriculum 'what works' in gifted rural programming. Miller and Brigandi note that place-based practices are supported by empirical evidence and are aligned to the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) PreK-12 Gifted Education Programming Standards, stating that "scholars propose incorporating place-sensitive curricula and pedagogy in teacher education and professional learning opportunities to support teachers who practice in rural areas" (2020, p. 104).

Both articles using the CLEAR curriculum with data collected from the Promoting PLACE Javits grant shared the impact of place on students. For Bass et al, the students connected to the environment that was situated in their locale, "The shift in how treatment students conceptualized place suggests they are thinking about place in more complex ways, grounding their concepts of place in local nature and the local environment", (2020, p. 18). They further describe, "Place does not have to be a building or a structure; students are thinking about place in terms of nature and the environment and the meanings and feelings ascribed to those places," (2020, p. 20). Kuehl et al. found that "when given the opportunity to craft a

story in whatever genre they wanted, many students relied on their local communities and natural surroundings as settings, suggesting that they consider place to be an important part of their worldview" (2020, p. 31). Their findings suggest "Because many of the students' descriptions of setting were so strong, this study indicates that a place-based curriculum emphasizing literature set in rural spaces may have helped foster the development of such impressive writing," (2020, p. 37).

**Identity**

The concept of place pushes beyond the boundary of place itself and into identity. "Students were taught to understand place as a valuable part of their identities through the reading, writing, and class discussions embedded in the Promoting PLACE curriculum," (Kuehl, et al., 2020, p. 37). However, as indicated by the equity theme earlier, not all gifted rural students have the same experiences, "certainly, many young, gifted, Black children live in rural areas, but they are not likely to see themselves in their classroom libraries," (Gallagher & Wrenn, 2020, p. 49). The idea of using books or curriculum that enables children to see the world outside windows as well as reflecting themselves mirrors is extensively researched; Gallagher and Wrenn indicate that a goal should be "that rural, Black, gifted learners have more opportunities to see mirrors of themselves in books and that those mirrors include how their rural communities are assets to their giftedness rather than deficits," (2020, p. 58). Davis et al. concur, stating, "Black students in rural areas, in particular those in GATE classes where they are racially isolated, benefit from seeing themselves reflected and affirmed in lesson plans and instructional materials," (2020, p. 94).

**How does gifted education view equity in the context of rurality?**

Historically and presently, gifted education's picture of rurality is one of disproportionality "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" (Miller & Brigandi, 2020, p. 102). One such institutional barrier can be the dichotomous view of urban versus rural. "Treating communities like they are either a city or a country mouse in an Aesop fable oversimplifies real differences. Binaries might provide a comforting heuristic, but they merely produce rough cuts of data that can blind policy makers from actual needs" (Thier et al., 2020, p. 77). In contrast, Thier et al. indicate that "our proximity and fully nuanced approaches can enable context-specific solutions for various needs that gifted students in rural and/or remote areas experience" (2020, p. 77).

Another institutional barrier might be the curricular options in the district. In their study of three teachers in rural schools in Appalachia, Miller and Brigandi noted that one teacher specifically mentioned that 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" (2020, p. 112). Davis et al. describe a principal cultural barrier being a lack of cultural awareness on the part of teachers. "When teachers fail to recognize the culture of their students, in this case what it means to be a Black rural student, it will be difficult to see their gifts and talents," (2020, p. 93). Davis et al. continue, "with Black gifted students, who may be more sensitive and insightful, this lack of teacher understanding can be problematic and also contributes to their underreferrals for GATE screening and retention in programs once identified," (2020, p. 93). Miller and Brigandi's case study corroborate this, "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" (Miller & Brigandi, 2020, p. 112). To address this need, Davis et al. (2020) suggest targeted professional learning experiences that address three principal areas: "(a) understanding the gifted traits, intellectual strengths, and unique psychosocial needs of diverse gifted and talented students; (b) knowing and being able to implement culturally responsive curriculum and instruction in

their gifted classes and specialized programs; and (c) understanding the cultural norms and traditions of culturally diverse families and communities" (p. 93).

**How does intersectionality impact gifted students?**

A key element of intersectionality is not just the overlap of identities but how they work together to perpetuate disadvantage, oppression or discrimination. As Lewis and Boswell share, "Rural gifted students may experience barriers related to their language, cultural background, and/or poverty, which influence their identification as well as retention...often the result of misconceptions of gifted education, teachers without gifted expertise, and vague gifted programming" (2020, p. 122). Gallagher and Wrenn discuss the challenge intersectionality brings to finding books as mirrors,

> While rural, Black, gifted youth may see one aspect of their identities represented in discourses around them, such as children's nonfiction literature, they are unlikely to find mirrors of their intersectional identities. While increases in representation of Black figures might make it easier to find books that mirror their racial identity, when seeking books that center on rural, Black people in positive ways the challenges are compounded. Finding a book about a Black person who is rural and also gifted is nearly impossible." (2020, p. 49)

Davis et al. discuss the added complexity that poverty adds to gifted and Black. "African American children in the rural South have borne a disproportionate share of the burden of poverty in America for decades... Neither genes nor zip code is cause for inequitable treatment" (2020, p. 96).

**How does (or should) gifted education as a field adjust in order to recognize the strengths and assets of our gifted rural students?**

Many of this special issue's articles had suggestions for this overarching question. I thought the finding from Miller and Brigandi was especially poignant to start with; the "findings of this study indicated teacher participants were willing and wanting professional learning opportunities to improve their practice" (2020, p. 113). Often, on the outside looking in, we can fall into a blame game: if only the teachers would… In this study, all three teachers were seeking knowledge to hone their craft and better meet the needs of their students.

Curriculum offerings were a significant response across the articles. Miller and Brigandi reported that teachers' knowledge of gifted pedagogy wasn't applicable to their rural settings and that "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" (2020, p. 113). Kuehl et al. suggested that districts advocate for a curriculum, similar to CLEAR, one that is already developed, based in place, and written specifically for gifted students, rather than a guide to follow that would help teachers plan for lessons (2020). Davis et al. extol the benefits of technology and its ability to bring curriculum to rural gifted students, but warn, "while these options are becoming more readily available to students living in rural communities, ensuring that high-potential Black students have access to emerging technology remains a challenge" (2020, p. 92).

Similar to curriculum, broader programmatic options have value in meeting the strengths and assets of gifted rural students. Davis et al. suggest programs at the regional level that can be in person or online, and share that in some cases, "rural districts have formed sophisticated regional consortiums with local universities to provide access through technologies not available to single schools or districts. The advantage of these online distance learning models is that they are more feasible and learner centered" (2020, p. 92). Another programmatic example is Lewis and Boswell's use of practice-based evidence to make programming decisions, "Rural school districts must account for the lived experiences within their communities when determining what works. Therefore, rather than EBP [evidence-based practices], practice-based evidence (PBE) plays a more important role in determining effective gifted programming and services in rural settings" (2020, p. 124). The researchers further explain:

> Utilizing PBE as a standard for creating gifted programming that works for the uniqueness of each rural community ensures gifted education in rural settings provides meaningful experiences that reflect the unique time, resources, and funding available for gifted students in that locale" (p. 124).

Both curriculum and programs benefit by having a focus on multiculturalism, cultural responsiveness, and equity. As Davis et al. state, "curriculum is incomplete if it is polemic and fails to promote empathy and inclusion—if students are not taught to think and learn beyond the scope of themselves, and if they cannot see others and the world from viewpoints other than their own" (2020, p. 81). Peer groups, identity groups, or cohort groups within schools or programs is one potential solution suggested by Davis et al.:

> Being Black *and* gifted in a rural school environment exacerbates these feelings of disconnectedness. When racially and culturally different gifted and talented students enter new programs with a group of students who are markedly different from them in income, race, ethnicity, language, culture, and experiences, their self-esteem, self-concept, and racial pride may suffer. Students need to feel a strong sense of belonging and acceptance to be recruited and retained in GATE programs, even more so for Black and Hispanic students due to underrepresentation. Cohort groups combat the effects of isolation and increase assurance of a more comfortable "fit" for students of color to focus more on the academic challenge and less on their need for acceptance. Educators are encouraged to develop service models to identify small groups of students and cohorts who can move through programs together. (2020, p. 91)

By providing a culturally responsive environment, teachers welcome and include Black gifted students, making them a part of the classroom community. "This sense of belonging is essential when there are few culturally different gifted and talented students in their classes, schools, and related activities (e.g., competitions) in a small school, as is usually the case in rural districts" (Davis et al., 2020, p. 93).

Another in-class theme that emerged across articles in response to this question was the idea of space and time in class. Kuehl et al. indicated that "providing space and time for students to create stories as they did during this project is valuable for gifted rural students' growth as literate individuals in the midst of the ongoing process of identity formation" (2020, p. 38). Without allowing for the time and space for their creative minds to work, the connections they made both to literature and to the social context of their classrooms might not have been made. Miller and Brigandi wrote about the limited time in class allowed for homogenous grouping for gifted students, "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" (2020, p. 107). While they agreed that mandates were important, gifted education was equally so. Lewis and Boswell (2020) also found that consistent time blocks were an important aspect for gifted programs, from the perspective of teachers.

In Myriah Miller and Carla Brigandi's article, as well as in Jennifer Gallagher and Melissa Wrenn's piece, there was a connection to 'schoolhouse giftedness' (Renzulli & Reis, 2014), a concept that has implications in terms of the strengths or assets of our gifted students. Miller and Brigandi connected to the idea, in how teachers noted the ideals, but didn't engage them in practice: "Additionally, teachers conceived ideals of giftedness beyond schoolhouse notions (Renzulli & Reis, 2014) but did not comprehensively engage these ideals in their curricular practice," (2020, p. 112). Gallagher and Wrenn, in contrast, found more of an opposition to the idea of schoolhouse giftedness in their critical analysis of historical literature:

> The texts trouble scholarly debunked yet popular notions of *schoolhouse giftedness*: giftedness identified only by traditional forms of identification, such as cognitive ability tests and other abilities valued in traditional school learning situations (Renzulli, 1999). None of the texts focused on the identification nor the

> cultivation of gifted abilities within school classrooms. Instead, the historical figures displayed productive-creative giftedness in the form of artistic expression and original thinking that was fueled by curiosity and self-driven inquiry. Instead of within the classroom, the enactments of giftedness took place in more community-based settings, where they had an authentic impact on others—another characteristic of creative-productive giftedness (Renzulli, 1999). Therefore, the texts offer a situated representation of giftedness in which community funds of knowledge (González et al., 2006) both affect and are affected by the gifted individual." (2020, p. 57)

The idea of schoolhouse giftedness versus creative productive giftedness and the knowledge of which giftedness is identified, or recognized is often a matter of training: what characteristics of giftedness do teachers recognize, refer, identify?

As a field, in order to recognize the strengths of our gifted students, we need to provide appropriate professional learning so that the gatekeepers to gifted programs are not barring gifted students from programs. Miller and Brigandi acknowledge of their sample of participants, "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" (2020, p. 112). Further, the researchers acknowledged that their participants' "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" (2020, p. 99) and that their "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" (2020, p. 26) pointing to a potential push/pull conflict on the part of the students, as well as potential training for the teachers to recognize this conflict. Lewis and Boswell (2020) indicate that the need for training for both coordinators and teachers is substantial for their study participants; Davis et al. (2020) concur, highlighting the need for teachers of color, as well as the need to train all teachers in cultural competency. "Culturally responsive education affirms the value of individual and cultural differences through the act of reducing or, better yet, eliminating prejudices, biases, microaggressions, and stereotypes based on sociocultural demographic variables" (Davis et al., 2020, p. 93).

## Closing Thoughts

As you read through this special issue of *Theory and Practice in Rural Education*, I hope you enjoy the contributions of this diverse range of scholars. They are teachers, school board employees, scholars from Assistant Professors to Endowed Full Professors, and scholars working beyond academia. Our contributors are working in the field of general education, rural, education, social justice, gifted education and beyond.

This issue has been put together with the gracious assistance of a TPRE graduate assistant, editorial team, peer reviewers, copy editors, and more. And, as is the case of so many of the days of our lives, we were repeatedly saved by our "tech friend". Nick Crimi saved us from a giant bug, a graphic that attempted a hostile takeover of our website, one editing section not playing nicely with another editing section (checkmarks and boxes and permissions, oh my!) and a *coup d'etat* from installing the new software! Thank you, Nick. We appreciate you.

Finally, if you have any thoughts, comments or questions, please contact the corresponding author using the contact information provided, and you are also welcome to contact me at novaka17@ecu.edu. As I close my announcements to my undergraduate students…

Yours in handwashing, maskwearing, and antiracism,

Dr. Angela Novak, Guest Editor, *Theory & Practice in Rural Education.*

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# A Place for Writing: Examining a Place-Based Curriculum for High-Performing Rural Writers

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This study explored how a critical and place-based language arts curriculum influenced high-performing rural students as writers. The sample included 199 students, who comprised the second cohort of students participating in the Promoting PLACE in Rural Schools grant and were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. Students in the treatment groups were provided instruction using four language arts units designed for high-achieving rural students, while students in the control group were provided the traditional language arts curriculum for their grade level. This study analyzed 149 pretests and 158 posttests from the 199 students, due to students being absent for testing or dropping from or being added to the study. Qualitative analysis of student pre- and posttest writing tasks supported the conclusion that, while students in the control group made connections to place, students in the treatment group made deeper and more critical place connections. These findings suggest that writing instruction that values students' lived experiences provides opportunities for students to make meaning using what they know and to critically examine their experiences as members of their local communities. This study provides insight into writing classrooms that embrace student experience and view students as valuable members of their communities.

***Keywords*:** writing instruction, rural education, place-based education, gifted education

Opportunity and achievement gaps between rural students and their suburban or urban counterparts are attributed to geographic isolation, lack of resources, decreased funding, and limited access to out-of-school educational resources (Azano, Callahan, et al., 2017; Mattingly & Schaefer, 2015; Richards & Stambaugh, 2015). In particular, opportunity gaps affect rural gifted students because decreased funding typically results in fewer specially prepared teachers and fewer resources for this group of students. Often, rural school districts do not have teachers endorsed or trained in gifted education, and when they do, the one gifted resource teacher is expected to provide services to several schools (Howley et al., 2009). If districts do not have gifted resource teachers, general education teachers are charged to differentiate their instruction to challenge these students, but they may not have the necessary training (Croft, 2015). Students in rural areas, including gifted students, need access to resources, both in and out of school, to reach their full potential (Howley et al., 2009). Therefore, many scholars approach issues related to rural gifted students in terms of equity and social justice.

To that end, sociocultural theories support democratic approaches to writing instruction that value students' individual experiences. Gruenewald (2003) provided a theoretical foundation to place-based education by connecting it to Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of critical pedagogy. As Gruenewald argued, the concept of place-based pedagogy connects to critical pedagogy by exploring how place can and should be used in critical ways. These two concepts are connected through the understanding that "the oppressed's reality, as

reflected in the various forms of cultural production—language, art, music—leads to a better comprehension of the cultural extension through which people articulate their rebelliousness against the dominant" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 137). Accordingly, Gruenewald's (2003) concept of a critical pedagogy was used as a theoretical underpinning to the Promoting PLACE (Place, Literacy, Achievement, Community, Engagement) in Rural Schools grant (here to after referred to as Promoting PLACE) as a framework to address the equity issues noted. Critical place theories informed curriculum development, research design, identification processes, instrument development, data generation, and analysis. Because one focus of the project curriculum was critical pedagogy of place infused into writing tasks, we examined the influence of that curriculum on high-performing rural students as writers. Critical pedagogy creates a useful frame for writing instruction because it creates conditions for students to question hierarchies and process experiences with inequality through writing.

Within the context of writing instruction, a critical pedagogy of place provides a framework for understanding that all writers belong to discourse communities (Nystrand, 1989). This means that writers operate within a conversation that has already started and is ongoing; the utterances they make are connected to past utterances and future utterances (Bakhtin, 1986). Once writers commit their words to paper, "an exchange of meaning or transformation of shared knowledge [happens] as writers and readers interact every time the readers understand a written text" (Nystrand, 1989, p. 74) and a common meaning is constructed. Because language and reality are inherently connected (Freire & Macedo, 1987), writing is a way for students to connect their reality with the reality of the classroom.

## Relevant Literature

Attending to gifted students in rural settings can be challenging in multiple ways. While opportunity gaps exist for all rural students, some school districts do not have the personnel to provide gifted pull-out or push-in services every day of the week; sometimes districts do not have the resources to offer any gifted services at all (Azano, 2009; Howley, et al., 2009; Mattingly & Shaefer, 2015). Often, even when a rural school district does have a gifted resource teacher, they may provide instruction across many grade levels in several schools each week and thus can provide gifted students instruction for only an hour or less per week (Azano, 2014; Howley et al., 2009).

### Place-Based, Critical, and Rural Literacies in Writing Instruction

Place-based pedagogy originated in fields outside education, such as anthropology and environmental studies, and according to Gruenewald (2003), lacked a theoretical foundation in education. By wedding it to critical pedagogy, he created a space to "[encourage] teachers and students to reinhabit their places . . . to pursue the kind of social action that improves the social and ecological life of places, near and far, now and in the future" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 8). Moreover, as students learn about local issues, these local issues inevitably "spiral out" into larger, global issues "because local reality is almost always shaped by much more widespread cultural, natural, and economic forces" (Brooke, 2011, p. 164).

Writing instruction is one avenue for students to explore the connections between their experiences and the curriculum, especially when teachers provide deliberate, intentional connections to community and place in the classroom. These connections are additionally fostered when students are given the opportunity to write without worrying about grammar, punctuation, and form (Donovan, 2016). Grammar and mechanics are important to learn; however, that learning needs to be done in context. When we give students the opportunity to write without worrying about grammar, punctuation, and form, they can focus on ideas first while also giving practical application for any grammar or mechanics lessons students may need. When exposed to place-based writing instruction, students write about things that matter to them and have authority and voice in their writing (Donovan, 2016). Place-based pedagogy also provides a way for students to engage in critical literacies (i.e., embracing the social construction of knowledge as

it relates to our worldviews; Comber et al., 2001; Eppley, 2011).

### Rural Literacies and Deliberate Connections to Place

The notion of rural literacies has evolved to incorporate dynamic and socially constructed meaning (Corbett & Donehower, 2017). Donehower et al. (2007) argued their work on rural literacies "highlight[s] the need for continued use of literate action to affect social change for rural peoples and rural communities" (p. 18). Moreover, this expanded view of literacies includes rural communities as global change agencies and as a part of a complex global economic and social network. Rural literacies in this context "becomes a matter of attending to text(s) and context(s)" (Green, 2013, p. 29). Literacies, including rural literacies, are social constructions, and it is important to find ways to connect the work done in the classroom to students' lives, communities, and place while also connecting students to the larger, global economic and social networks in which their community operates, to reinforce the cultural sustainability of rural communities.

If we think of literacy as the mastery of discourses, then the mastery of discourses in rural communities can be understood as *rural literacies*, particularly as they relate to the social practices used in rural communities to sustain rural places (Donehower et al., 2007). Edmondson (2003), for example, wrote about a pile of corn that was used as a protest. To people outside the rural community of "Prairie Town" its meaning would have been missed, but for local residents the corn represented a rural *text* symbolizing farmers' collective refusal to sell their corn at an unfair price. The farmers' rural literacies, that is, their knowledge of local economies and agribusiness in this case, afforded them a powerful way to advocate for their rights. For rural students, the idea of rural literacies can be a vital part of understanding rural places.

To understand the influence of a place-based curriculum on students' notions of and connections to place in their writing, we asked what influence a place-based curriculum has on high-performing rural students as writers. Understanding students' connections to place in their writing was used to inform how a dialogic stance can be incorporated with a critical, place-based curriculum to highlight the affordances and inequities that exist for rural high- performing students.

### Sample

The data used for this study were generated as part of a 5-year, federally funded grant (Callahan & Azano, 2014–2019) focusing on rural schools. The Promoting PLACE grant had two overarching priorities: to provide an alternative identification process for high-poverty rural schools and to implement a place-based curriculum for those identified for gifted services (in treatment schools). In this article, we use the term *high performing*, as the students may not meet more traditional definitions of *gifted*; however, they were identified for the program based on a place-conscious protocol (e.g., using local instead of national norms). Three cohorts of students participated in Promoting PLACE. Eligible districts for the project were categorized as rural according to National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) coding (fringe, distant, or remote) and considered high poverty by the state where the study was conducted (more than 50% of the district's students receiving free/reduced lunch). Schools were randomly assigned to condition at the district level to avoid contamination because in some of the school districts one teacher delivered instruction to all identified students. Students in the treatment group were instructed using four language arts units that included critical, place-based elements, while students in the control group were taught using the curriculum their districts typically provided for gifted students. Students in the sample belonged to cohort 2 in the larger Promoting PLACE study, the largest cohort ($N$=199) to have completed the pre/post writing tasks, which participated for approximately 1.5 years in the larger study (grade 3 and half of grade 4).

The data used for analysis were students' writing from two general writing tasks aligned with skills assessed with state standards. Alignment of the tasks with standards ensured students in the control districts were not expected to undertake a task not included in the grade-level curriculum. After the writing tasks were developed, they were sent to

content-area expert reviewers for review, which elicited revisions, and then were piloted in two schools. Responses on the pilot assessment indicated students were not providing the type of writing expected from the prompt as written; the writing task prompt was revised to include the necessary criteria for genre and form. The final writing tasks were used to assess writing cohorts 2 and 3, which consisted of students added to the study in the subsequent two years of the larger project (Callahan & Azano, 2014–2019).[1]

**Data Sources**

For the pretest writing task, administered between January and March of students' third-grade year, students wrote a letter to new students who would be attending their school in the upcoming school year. Students were asked to include both educational and noneducational activities in which new students can expect to participate when they come to the school and that make their school special. The writing task was untimed but designed for students to complete in one session of about 30–40 minutes; students were not expected to spend more than one class session on the writing tasks. For the posttest writing task, administered one year later, students wrote about a place they deemed special, limited to places they actually visited. Students were instructed to describe what a great day is like in this place to someone who has never been, using as much descriptive language as they deemed necessary to paint a picture for the reader. This writing task was also administered in one session of about 30–40 minutes.

**Treatment**

Students in the treatment group were instructed using the CLEAR (Challenge Leading to Engagement, Achievement, and Results) curriculum model (Azano, Tackett, et al., 2017). This curriculum was modified by project personnel to infuse place-based connections into four language-arts-based units and to ensure alignment with state and grade-level standards. The four units were designed with rural students in mind and used information from teacher surveys to include deliberate place-based connections. In third grade, students are instructed on the topics of poetry and folklore, with opportunities to connect to local poetry and folklore. In fourth grade, students are instructed on the topics of fiction and research, with opportunities to connect to the stories of their communities and to research topics of interest to them within their communities. Teachers are provided with training by project personnel prior to teaching either the third- or fourth-grade units to ensure they understood the tenets of the CLEAR curriculum. Students were instructed using the curriculum a minimum of once each week; program delivery varied based on district resources and personnel availability.

**Data Analysis**

A priori place-based codes tied to the explicit focus of the curriculum were developed based on a rubric used by an expert (a rural scholar) to review the project curriculum for the PLACE (place, literacy, achievement, community, and engagement) components. The expert evaluated the project curriculum to ensure it adequately addressed project goals. For example, the criterion for place was "efforts made to integrate prior local knowledge and to embed place-specific characteristics into content," and for "community" was "opportunities are provided for community outreach and involvement" (Callahan & Azano, 2014–2019). The expert read and evaluated the curriculum by responding to such questions as:

- How well does the curriculum address these threats, and do you feel these attempts are successful?
- Does the curriculum emphasize rural strengths, or does it unintentionally focus on deficits?

A priori codes were then used to understand the content of student responses. These themes were further refined by integrating concepts related to

[1] In the larger research study, a scoring rubric was developed, tested, and used to measure growth over time; however, the rubric was not used for the analysis in this study because it focused on qualitative characteristics of the students' writing.

place and community and from a preexisting framework for analyzing place documents (Azano, 2009). Table 1 lists the a priori codes used by the first author to identify how students referenced place in their writing.

Table 1

*A Priori Place-Based Codes*

| Code | Criterion |
|---|---|
| Family/heritage | Describes and/or mentions family (e.g., mother, father, siblings, cousins) and/or information about family characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, country/region of origin, family history stories, traits), living situations, family backgrounds hobbies, or values. |
| Local people | Describes and/or mentions local people (e.g., shop owners, neighbors, teachers, police officers, politicians). |
| Local places | Describes and/or mentions local places (e.g., local meeting places, parks, museums, stores, events). |
| Local histories | Describes and/or mentions local histories (e.g., local folklore, legends) or historic information (e.g., coal mining, civil war). |
| Community involvement | Describes and/or mentions participation in community events (e.g., fairs, contests, community cleanup, volunteer work). |
| Other | Connects to community and/or place in their writing, but example does not fit into any previous code. (This code was used to identify connections to nature or the environment, as well as descriptions of these places.) |

To analyze student writing, the first author read through each student's pre- and posttest writing tasks, noting references to place related to the a priori codes; sentences, words, and phrases were organized by code in an Excel spreadsheet. Examining student writing for their conceptualizations of place, attending to the individual words and phrases used to make meaning, allowed us to understand ways students use language to connect to the reality of their place. The first author then compared the references between treatment and control groups, using differences to construct key themes related to the influence of the curriculum on students as writers and noting connections between specific elements of the curriculum and the ways students referenced place.

## Findings: Unpacking Sense of Place and Exploring It Through Writing

Of the 199 students in cohort 2, the sample used for this qualitative data set comprised pretest data from 149 (61 treatment and 88 control) students and posttest data from 158 (78 treatment and 80 control) students, due to students being absent for testing or dropping from or being added to the study. This provided a rich sample to examine student writing as a window into how they are processing their experiences and communicating potential shifts in understanding of concepts and contexts. Seen from this perspective, writing is a means of meaning making, which, as Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) argued, requires understanding and response. Data analysis identified three key themes indexing how the curriculum influenced students as writers: treatment students (a) used more descriptive and vivid language in their writing about place, (b) shifted their understanding of the important role people play in their places and the stories of their lives, and (c) expanded their concepts of place to those outside the immediate building, locale, or structure. These changes worked together as part of the treatment students' more complex understanding that transcended the

boundaries of their school. This shows a larger concept of place as emphasized throughout the curriculum, where each of the units has explicit ways for students to connect what they are learning to their community and region.

**Treatment Students Used More Descriptive, Detailed, and Vivid Language**

Treatment students shifted to more descriptive, detailed, and vivid language in their writing from pre- to posttest, illustrating greater proficiency in the use the tools of the discipline (i.e., writing) to share their experiences with others. The following a priori codes (from Table 1) illustrated this shift: in pretests students referenced "local people" the most in description but used "other" descriptions in posttests, describing nature and the environment. On the pretest writing task, both groups of students used adjectives and a few instances of figurative language, but their use of descriptive language was similar. For example, treatment student 1, in describing the teachers at school, wrote,

> The teachers are really friendly. In Kintergarten the classes have extraordinary teachers. Mr. Gill helps you realy learn math! The science teacher (Mrs. Panetta) even has pickeled bugs! In 3rd, 4th, and 5th you take [state test] but the teachers help you learn your stuff!"[2]

This student is using several examples of descriptive language with the use of words like "friendly" and "extraordinary." The student is describing the personality of the teachers but does not provide enough detail to allow the reader to imagine what the teacher is like. In student writing across both groups on the pretest writing task, the description of teachers or school personnel used the most descriptive language used but showed a limited understanding of how to use the tools of the discipline (i.e., to show, not tell).

In their posttest writing, control students used less detailed descriptive language compared to treatment students and did not use showing rather than telling (i.e., using descriptive language to paint a picture) to share experiences. Control students' use of detailed, descriptive language on the posttest task was similar to that of their pretest writing. They used adjectives or figurative language to describe their experiences but did not evoke the senses or paint a picture with their description. Control student 2, for example, in describing their yard, wrote:

> When you walk in you can hear leaves rustling in the wind and you can hear the faint sound of twigs breaking as dozens of deer run through the woods behind my house. They have white tails that whenever they are startled they go up like flags as they sprint away. When you walk in you smell lushing green pine cones. You see a squirl up in the tree top climbing over branches about to jump on your tree house. It's mouth is full of nuts its about to go and get more. You hear the stream running in the back in the woods. You want to go see its aqua blue colors very badly.

This student's description of their yard uses several adjectives and figurative language, such as "leaves rustling in the wind" and "white tails that go up like flags." This student is trying to describe the yard in a way that evokes the senses, but the student is just telling the reader what they are seeing, smelling, hearing, or touching, preventing readers from creating their own image of the scene. The control students were not using the tools of the discipline to show rather than tell.

Treatment students showed a distinct shift in the use of descriptive language in the posttest results. They shifted their use of descriptive, detailed, and vivid language, using the tools of the discipline to share their experiences in their places. When describing a place special to them, treatment student 2 wrote about the woods in the backyard:

> Sometimes I go up into the beautiful, warm, and colorful woods. The trees are tall and extremely colorful in the fall. They are like nature's firework show booming red, yellow, and orange leave. . . . Another time in woods I went up into a hunting stand and sat down. It was dirty and smelly like old socks. . . . First of all we had to hike through the painful and clingy sticker bushes. Then we

[2] In this article we have maintained spelling for all student examples, so writing errors are the students' own; additionally, all names used are pseudonyms.

> had to trek through the woods that were prickly and taller than me!

This student's description of the woods in their backyard uses lists of several different adjectives, "beautiful, warm, and colorful woods," and uses figurative language like "they are like nature's firework show booming red, yellow, and orange leave." Their use of descriptive and figurative language is threaded throughout the discussion of their special place. This suggests students are thinking about place in a more nuanced way, focusing on the description of the place, using the tools of the discipline, so the reader can imagine the scene set by the writer. The use of these tools throughout students' description of the woods exemplifies how writers use description to share their experiences with others.

These contrasting posttest examples show the discernible difference in how treatment and control students used descriptive language. Treatment student 2 describes the special place in a way that evokes the senses, without expressing which sense is being evoked. The use of descriptive language shows readers the place using the tools skillful writers use, while control student 2 is telling readers what they should experience at that place. Students in the treatment group, by using tools of the discipline to show readers, are giving readers the opportunity to create a personal image.

Throughout all four units of the Promoting PLACE curriculum, students are taught the language and tools of the discipline: writers use descriptive language to evoke the senses and paint a picture for the reader. For example, in the third-grade poetry unit, the first four lessons are dedicated to imagery, abstract and concrete words, and evoking the senses. Those concepts are reinforced throughout this unit and the remaining three units. Students are continuously asked to analyze readings for descriptive language, while also using those tools in the writers' workshops interspersed all through the units. Students using descriptive, detailed, vivid language as tools of the discipline shows they are gaining confidence as writers and are able to see themselves as members of the elusive "writers' club" (Stewart, 2011). Treatment students' use of more descriptive, detailed language in their posttests reflects the constant reinforcement on these skills in their lessons.

**Treatment Students' Writing Signaled a Shift in Conceptualizing the Importance of People to Place**

Another significant reflection of the curriculum in the writing of treatment students is the shift in how they connect the importance of people to place. This is significant because lessons in the curriculum provided opportunities for students to discuss place, including the importance of people in their communities. Additionally, the curriculum provided instruction on the various forms of characterization (e.g., direct/indirect characterization, round/flat characters). The shift in how treatment students discuss people in relation to place shows treatment students were thinking more complexly about how people function as characters in the stories of their lives while also shifting their concept of place away from the immediate place: their school. The "local people" code was used to index this shift.

On their pretest writing tasks, all students wrote about local people associated with their school, which was not surprising, given the prompt asked them to write about their school. When students wrote about people in their pretest results, they would list many people or groups of people associated with their school. For example, treatment student 3 wrote,

> We also have super fun teachers to, some of them let you do games if you finesh. Mrs. Ogelsby is a fun teacher she is my best friend she likes to draw pictures with kids and for kids she is assistant teacher she helps when we go to lab. Mrs. Hallanack is nice teacher to she teaches pre-k.

This student's discussion of several teachers is an example of how both treatment and control students were writing about local people associated with their school. Mostly, students would mention teachers who were "super fun" or "nice," indicating that these teachers are what make their school special. This indication that people are important to the school also shows up in control students' writing. For the pretest results, there is little difference between

treatment and control students' conceptualizations of local people and the important roles they play in place.

Control students also wrote about local people in their posttest writing, typically family members. However, their descriptions of local people suggest they were part of the story being told; they acted more as background characters in the story instead of connecting them to place the way treatment students did. For example, control student 4, when writing about their home, wrote: "My sister Alex which is 5 sleeps on the bottem and her stuffed animals and owl sheets cause she loves owls. Next my sister Tiffany sleeps on the top bunk with dolls and stuffed animals." This student is writing about their home. This student's letter is describing the layout of their home, moving from room to room. They describe their siblings' bedroom and who sleeps where, and mention some personality traits, such as "she loves owls," but their family is functioning in their place as other people who occupy that space, not as part of what makes that place special.

Treatment students wrote differently about their family members in ways that show an incorporation of characteristics of family as part of what makes the place special. Their writing suggests treatment students find places special, as long as their family is there with them. For example, treatment student 4, when writing about home, wrote:

> I live in the trailer with my dad, mom, golden lab, and my two little sisters Rachele who is four and Elora who is five months. A few things that make our trailer special are my sister Rachele who is always playing with my chubby funny other sister Elora. Some other stuff that makes our trailer special is my dad because his like our crew chief. My mom on the other hand can be somewhat annoying! She is always demanding for a lot of stuff like clean your room, fold your clothes, GET OFF THE COMPUTER!!! . . . Sometimes my sister Rachele can be soooooo annoying. She is always saying stuff like you need to stop doing that or I'm gonna tell mommy!

This student is writing about their family members, providing their characteristics, showing the family dynamic. By describing the personality traits in various ways and providing examples of how those traits manifest, treatment students show how important their family is in their place and the stories of their lives. This student's discussion of their family members provides both direct and indirect characterization, reinforcing the roles each person plays in the family and their place. Even though this student discusses things that are not always positive, such as "My mom on the other hand can be somewhat annoying!" it is clear that this student's family is important to their place; their family plays an important role in the story of their life.

The differences in the depiction of family can be linked to lessons in the fiction unit, which has three lessons dedicated to characters and characterization. In lessons dealing with characters and characterization, students are given several opportunities to describe characters in different ways, so they can develop the skill of showing their importance to the story. The emphasis on the importance characters and people play in the stories they read and write has influenced these students as writers. They expanded their view of who is important to their place from just listing those people to describing them as important characters in the stories of their lives. Hillocks (2007) suggested anyone can write about things as small as "mothers and morning glories and moonpies" (p. 48) because "even the smallest experiences are worth writing about" (p. 37). Students connecting local people to their place in a more nuanced way exemplifies Hillocks' concept.

**Treatment Students Expanded Their View of Place to a Larger Concept of Place**

Students in the treatment group expanded their concept of place to include places beyond their local or immediate place. The "local places" and "other" codes were used to index this shift in treatment students' discussion of place to outside a building or structure. The curriculum provided opportunities for teachers to connect the lessons to students' place, which provided a space for students to think about the larger conceptualizations of place; students are thinking about place in terms of nature and the surrounding environment.

The pretest results were essentially the same for both treatment and control groups in their discussion of place; the places they mentioned were their schools, which was expected because the prompt asked them to introduce new students to their school. For example, treatment student 5 wrote, "Welcome to [my school]." Students would mention their school and then, per the prompt, go on to describe the things that make it special. Students were limiting their place, even though the prompt asked them to discuss both educational and noneducational activities that make their school special.

On their posttests control students showed some connection to nature or places outside their immediate place, but those were not typically grounded in the local place. Some students would write about their yards or local parks, but most students discussed nature or the environment in relation to places they went on vacation. For example, control student 5, when describing a trip to the beach, wrote: "So it was a sunny day at the beach. It was beautiful so what I done was fish, swim, body surf, and it was sandy so it was perfect for crawdaddy catching." This student's description of the trip to the beach has some description of the environment and nature, but they are describing a place beyond the borders of the locale. This vacation spot is important to this student, but connecting to places beyond the borders of the locale suggests that, without a connection to place in the curriculum, students are not given opportunities to connect their learning to their place, thus do not see what makes their local place special.

The shift in how treatment students conceptualized place suggests they are thinking about place in more complex ways, grounding their concepts of place in local nature and the local environment. The nature and environment students connect to are grounded in their locale; they described the environment, nature, or outdoors in their communities. For example, treatment student 6 wrote about the evergreen trees in the yard:

> There are about 4 big, full evergreen trees. They are about 50 ft. tall. I like to climb the soft, brown, strong, branches. When I get about halfway up there is this opening where I like to hear the birds chirping and see the beautiful sky. When I climb the trees the green thick firs tickle my skin. . . . We sat down on the strong branches until it got dark and we climbed down the big, thick, sturdy, brown branches. Then we jumped down the soft, thin, brown branches crunched at our feet. We walked out of the prickly green firs and found ourselves in the tickly green grass. Now you know why I love these big, tall, sturdy, awesome, green trees. I love those trees.

This student's description suggests these trees are important to them. They climb the trees and "like to hear the birds chirping and see the beautiful sky," which suggests these trees are a place they find solace in nature; they have a connection to these trees. Students in the treatment group described places near their homes or local communities, such as trees and parts of their yard, but they connected those places directly to the environment and surrounding nature. This shift from the immediate place, such as their school, to places beyond their immediate scope suggests they are thinking about place in more complex ways, describing special places connected to nature.

Treatment students' shifts in conceptualizing people and place worked together, indicating people and locations are ways of understanding place and thinking about place in more complex ways. For example, on the posttest treatment student 7 wrote,

> My special place is a place I go with four special people. Those people are my cousins, Amelia, Judy, one of my brothers, Auston, and I. This place is a lush field. Beautiful cows graze there sometimes, so we have to be very careful. . . . Once we get to the field, it's almost complete bliss. The best time to play there is in the fall. It's crisp and cool and perfect. . . . This is a place we can play in harmony, something we can't do often. It's special, and I love our big field, a place where we can get along.

This student is describing a place where they and their family members can play together. The field is a harmonizing place for their relationship. People and location matter to the importance of place;

when these two things function together, students see those places as special.

Examples from the curriculum used in the treatment illustrate the chance to connect what students are learning to their place. For example, in the research unit, part of the fourth-grade curriculum, students are encouraged to research something connected to their locale. In lesson 2, the place connection suggests teachers

> Encourage students to think locally for their areas of interest. For example, a student who wrote about a musical instrument might be interested in the history of Appalachian music. A student who wrote about a family heirloom may be interested in how their family came to this region of the state. (Callahan & Azano, 2014–2019)

This is one of the many opportunities students have to connect what they are learning about research to their hometowns and families. Suggestions for teachers to connect what students are discussing or learning to their communities and places are included in all four units. Place does not have to be a building or a structure; students are thinking about place in terms of nature and the environment and the meanings and feelings ascribed to those places, shown by students mentioning "I love those trees" or their love of their big field.

## Discussion

This study created an opportunity to examine how using a place-based curriculum might influence high-performing rural students as writers. Qualitative understandings suggest treatment students moved beyond superficial explorations of place; they connected place to important people who make those places special and nuanced their discussion of place by moving beyond the immediate building or structure to a discussion of nature and the environment. The findings suggest that writing, as a way to process experience and provide a glimpse into students' experiences, helped treatment students "develop stronger ties to their community [and] enhance [their] appreciation for the natural world" (Sobel, 2005, p. 7).

### Using Tools of the Profession as a Common Language

That treatment students shifted their use of descriptive and detailed language to show their readers the place they were describing suggests the importance of teaching writing skills as tools writers use to share their experiences to "take [their] reader with [them]" (Jensen, 2004, p. 58). When a Promoting PLACE curriculum lesson calls for a discussion on descriptive language and evoking the senses in writing, the discussion is based on those elements of writing as tools writers use. This connection to the profession in the curriculum shows up as student's using more descriptive language in their writing. Connecting instruction and lessons to the work of professionals is one of the primary underlying philosophies informing the development of the CLEAR curriculum, on which the Promoting PLACE curriculum was based (Reis & Renzulli, 2003).

### Instructional Take-aways

Treatment students' use of descriptive and detailed language suggests the discourse community (Gee, 2015) in the classroom led them to the common understanding of the importance of this writing tool. As students use tools of the profession to write about things that are important to them, they are writing with more passion and depth (Worthman et al., 2011). Providing opportunities for students to process their experience as members of their communities and connecting classroom instruction to place apply the concepts of critical literacy (Freire & Macedo, 1987) and the importance of schools reflecting student experiences (Dewey, 1938). Using place as a foundation of experience, while also providing a space for students to enter into dialogue with the curriculum and their experiences, helps them to make their own understandings of the lessons in school, using the tools of the profession (descriptive language, diction, showing and not telling) (Stewart, 2011). To enact this type of instruction, to help students develop as writers, teachers can:

- *Identify ways writers show their experiences in readings and connecting to students' experiences:* Teachers can help students develop their understanding of

tools writers use by analyzing the texts in the classroom. As students are reading a passage, story, novel, or article, have them identify the tools writers are using for that particular genre. As they annotate the text for tools of the discipline, they can also look for place connections or how they have had similar experiences. For example, in the third-grade Promoting PLACE folklore unit, students were encouraged to discuss how their experiences relate to the stories they read while also focusing on how writers share those experiences.

- *Brainstorm experiences students want to explore*: Teachers can create classroom experiences that help students identify and call attention to what matters to them. Have students brainstorm experiences they want to explore through writing by choosing writing about what they know and what matters to them (Donovan, 2016; Jensen, 2004; King, 2000). Teachers can help students connect experiences with concepts being taught in the classroom through discussion, conferencing, or writing. In the Promoting PLACE curriculum, students did this by taking an interest inventory relating to their sense of place, by looking at artifacts or mementos in their homes or rooms, so teachers could connect the curriculum to students' place.

**Deliberate Connections to Place Supports Student Thinking About the Value of Place**

The finding that treatment students nuanced how they discussed people and places suggests that a deliberate connection to place provides opportunities for students to "weave complex place-based connections" (Waller & Barrentine, 2015, p. 7). The Promoting PLACE curriculum provided opportunities for teachers to make a deliberate connection to place in the classroom. The influence of this connection to place was evident in treatment student writing. For example, treatment students connected their conceptualizations of place to nature and the environment. This discussion of nature suggests that providing opportunities for students to think about and discuss place in the classroom, as it relates to the curriculum, helps students nuance how they discuss and think about place—meaning place is more about the connections people have to those places, such as feeling solace when climbing a tree or being a part of nature that holds personal meaning. Using students' experiences as a stimulus for teaching creates opportunities to make personal connections to what is happening in the classroom and enhances the meaning making process (Fecho et al., 2012); this connects to a deliberate connection to place by giving students guidance on how their experience as members of their local communities connects to the classroom.

Students have individual experiences and common experiences as members of their communities, and this affects how they make meaning in the classroom; those differences are a part of the social construction of the classroom reality. Through writing, students coconstruct the reality of the classroom and show a "bearing on the well-being of the social and ecological places [they] inhabit" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 8). The finding that students are nuancing how they discuss place, connecting places to the people who help to make those places special, suggests they care about how people and places function together in the stories of their lives. A place-based pedagogy provides an avenue for students to express themselves in writing and become an authority in the classroom by writing about things they know.

**Instructional Take-aways.** Providing students with a space to connect to their out-of-school experiences gives them an opportunity to think about and process experiences in critical ways (Hillocks, 2007). With rural literacies in mind, which are a "matter of attending to text(s) and context(s)" (Green, 2013, p. 29), students' experiences can connect to the texts in the classroom while providing context to help students make meaning. Furthermore, rural literacies are a social construction: the literacies of the texts and contexts are constructed by the people who live there. Providing a deliberate connection to students' place will help them understand how texts and contexts work together to make meaning. These strategies allow teachers to attend to the specific rural context

in which they teach. To enact this deliberate connection to place, teachers can:

- *Connect themes in readings to cultural and local themes*: Teachers can provide opportunities for students to connect the texts of the classroom to what they know. As students read, provide opportunities for students to discuss how the themes of the readings connect to the cultural and local themes. Students can be asked to bring in a family heirloom, photo, or other personal item that a text makes them think of. Students can use these items as a catalyst for discussion or a guided free-write, to help students make meaning with the context of the reading, in connection with their personal items (Stewart, 2011). The project curriculum emphasizes teachers connecting readings to students' experiences. For example, in the Promoting PLACE folklore unit, students examined local stories they knew as part of learning about folklore. This discussion can also take the form of a guided free-write, where students write for 5 minutes on the themes and how they connect, opening up opportunities for students to get their ideas out before having a discussion.
- *Interview family members to understand family stories*: Teachers can provide students with opportunities to understand their family stories by interviewing parents, grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles, or even neighbors, asking them about the stories that have been passed down in their families. As students conduct these interviews, they are using their "funds of knowledge" (González et al., 2005) and cultural context to shape the fabric of language and make meaning (Bakhtin, 1981). Then, students can write those stories or a version of those stories that connects to their own experiences. This is similar to the Promoting PLACE folklore unit, which focuses on how stories in their communities become folklore or legend, so students can connect what they know to the curriculum.

## Conclusion

The findings and understandings from this study indicate that providing opportunities for high-performing students to connect to and discuss place in relation to the curriculum helps them think about place in more complex ways and expand writing skills. Connecting to place in the classroom emphasizes the importance of communities in shaping who students are and how they learn, valuing students' experiences in those communities.

Writing instruction that connects to place provides opportunities for students to enter into a discourse community (Gee, 2015), entering into a conversation that is ongoing. As students enter into this ongoing conversation through writing about their experiences, they are transacting with other viewpoints and other classmates' experiences to create a strong and positive environment for learning (Fecho, 2000). As students transact with the various texts in the classroom, they also inquire into those transactions, questioning the new texts created through these transactions and how different people can interpret and understand things differently. As Freire and Macedo (1987) asserted, "Reading does not merely consist of decoding the written word or language; rather it is preceded by and intertwined with the knowledge of the world. Language and reality are dynamically interconnected" (p. 29). Using critical literacies, and critical pedagogy of place, the classroom then becomes a space where there is an understanding that "all [writers] belong to discourse communities" (Nystrand, 1989, p. 71) and where students can use writing to connect their reality with the reality of the classroom. Through writing, coconstructing meanings and experiences, and transacting with texts, students inquire into and challenge the tensions that exist in their communities and lives.

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# Gifted Rural Writers Explore Place in Narrative Fiction Stories

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Place-based writing practices can enrich a standardized curriculum while increasing student engagement and helping students improve essential writing skills. In particular, *place,* which includes both the geographic surroundings and the local community with whom one shares a common space, can be a point of access to the language arts curriculum for gifted rural students, especially because place-based literacy practices can demonstrate that students' place-based knowledge and interests are valuable assets they bring to their learning experiences. This article examines narrative fiction stories written by 237 gifted rural fourth graders as the culminating project of a semester-length fiction unit of a place-based language arts enrichment curriculum to identify how gifted rural fourth graders describe setting in narrative fiction stories and how they reflect a sense of place in those descriptions. Students' descriptions of settings were explicated to note how they represented spaces both similar to and different from the rural communities in which they lived. Thematic findings reveal rich descriptions of nature, depictions of close-knit rural communities, and feelings of displacement among story characters who find themselves in unfamiliar spaces.

***Keywords*: narrative fiction writing, setting, gifted, rural education, place-based instruction**

Learning to write well prepares students to take advantage of innumerable future academic and professional opportunities (Fox, 1988). Writing is also a unique form of self-expression (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978) that has cultural value. However, with the pressure for schools to perform well on tests of measurable literacy skills, many elementary teachers limit instruction to writing conventions rather than meaningful writing (Coker et al., 2016; Graham et al., 2012; Korth et al., 2016; McCarthey & Ro, 2011; Simmerman et al., 2012). This can be especially problematic in rural schools where test scores have lagged, prompting mandates for decontextualized and commercialized curricula, further limiting teachers' ability to choose instructional materials to meet the needs of their students (Eppley, 2011; MacDaniels & Brooke, 2003). While all students need and deserve the chance to develop their creativity and writing skills throughout the school day, the limitations imposed by standardized curricula can be significantly detrimental for gifted students, who likely master grade-level standards faster than their peers and should be challenged in ways that will continue to advance their learning (Latz & Adams, 2011; Tomlinson, 2001).

Some educators have turned to place-based pedagogy to increase curricular relevance for rural students. *Place*, in this context, refers to the place where someone lives or has lived and includes both the geographic surroundings and the local community with whom one shares a common space. In describing the attachment people feel to place, Kruger (2001) wrote, "We cherish places not just by what we can get from them, but for the way we define ourselves in relation to them . . . [as]

places with stories, memories, meanings, sentiments, and personal significance" (p. 178). Place-based pedagogy, then, aims to "ground learning in local phenomena and students' lived experiences" (Smith, 2002, p. 586). In particular, place-based writing practices have been offered as a means to enrich a standardized curriculum while increasing student engagement and helping students improve essential writing skills (Donovan, 2016). According to Bangert and Brooke (2003), all writers "need ways to connect their literacy to the world around them—to the places, people, and interests that make their world personally meaningful" (p. 23).

One challenge faced by rural teachers is that for some students, the writing curriculum feels disconnected from their lives outside of school (Azano, 2011). For example, students are often assigned to respond to writing prompts they feel have little or nothing to do with their own experiences (Esposito, 2012; Goodson & Skillen, 2010; Ruday & Azano, 2019). In contrast, researchers have shown that place-based instruction fosters rural students' sense of relevance toward the language arts curriculum (Azano, 2011; Ruday & Azano, 2014). This is perhaps because "place is a lens through which young people begin to make sense of themselves and their surroundings" (McInerney et al., 2011, p. 5). Place is often a central part of one's identity (Azano, 2011; Brooke, 2003a; Donovan, 2016; Jacobs, 2011; Sobel, 1996). Hence, teaching from a place-based perspective, rather than one that privileges the perspectives of the larger dominant culture, can enhance gifted rural students' connectedness to the language arts curriculum by demonstrating that their "unique and individualized place-based interests" are valuable assets they bring to their learning experiences (Ruday & Azano, 2019, p. 19). In fact, according to Rasheed (2019), "Place has the potential to garner students' attention in the classroom and make meaningful curricular connections to their lives outside of the classroom" (p. 74), which can thus positively influence both individual children and the community in which they live.

In response to the challenges outlined above, this article explores one way to effectively educate gifted rural learners in the elementary grades. The primary research questions guiding this study were (a) how gifted rural fourth graders describe setting in narrative fiction stories, and (b) how they reflect a sense of place in those descriptions. This article examines narrative fiction stories written by rural fourth graders as the culminating project of a semester-length fiction unit of a place-based language arts enrichment curriculum. In particular, because place and setting are such closely related concepts, students' descriptions of settings are explicated to note how they represented spaces both similar to and different from the rural communities in which students lived and how the student authors used their descriptions of setting to situate their characters in the various plot lines they constructed. This area of inquiry aligns with the work of Case (2017), who wrote,

> Most [creative writing] textbooks have at least a chapter entirely devoted to "setting," and . . . it seems an easy jump to also discuss the ways that the social and cultural features of a certain setting, along with its environmental features, affect, and are affected by, the characters. (p. 7)

## Place-Based Writing Instruction for Rural Students

Some scholars of place-based pedagogy (e.g., Smith, 2002; Sobel, 1996) emphasize students' connection to nature and the outdoors, believing that from an ecological standpoint future generations may not become adults heavily invested in protecting the environment unless they are provided opportunities to explore and care for it. This connection to nature might be stronger for rural students, who tend to live in larger spaces with more varied natural phenomena (in contrast with children who reside in urban areas, perhaps). Other scholars (e.g., Gruenewald, 2003; McInerney et al., 2011; Ruday & Azano, 2019) attend to critical aspects of place and the socioeconomic and cultural benefits of a place-based pedagogy, believing that a focus on place can help rural students view their own communities through a critical lens, thereby examining how they can effect positive change through activism and critique.

**Research on Place-Based Writing**

Several studies have looked at place-based writing in the elementary classroom (e.g., Charlton et al., 2014; Coleman, 2011; Comber et al., 2001). For example, Wason-Ellam (2010) used a place-based approach to enliven the literacy learning of a group of third-grade students. After sharing picture books that highlighted the beauty found in nature, the children were brought outdoors to explore their own rural community and natural surroundings, then they wrote and illustrated stories and poems in response. Because these place-based creations revealed new understandings about their students' identity, the teacher felt she was able to meet the students' learning needs more effectively (Wason-Ellam, 2010). Another group of third-grade students researched the wildlife in their community and then published a blog to help inform local residents about the plant and animal coinhabitants of the area (Duke, 2016). The authentic purpose and place-based focus of this task proved highly engaging to the student writers, highlighting the empowering nature of place-based writing.

In another study (Comber et al., 2001), the teacher of a multiage (grades 2 and 3) class led her students in conducting fieldwork and research about trees, then the class wrote letters to local government agencies asking that trees be planted to help beautify the impoverished neighborhood in which their school was located. Through writing, the teacher provided "a way to link [students'] social sense of neighborhood 'propriety' with knowledge, networks, and actions in which they took civic responsibility, worked cooperatively, and lobbied and organized as social activists" (p. 462). Similarly, a study of place-based argument writing in a rural middle school (Ruday & Azano, 2019) provided an opportunity for students to advocate for positive changes for their community. Students wrote about a wide variety of topics (e.g., the benefits of playing football despite the risks; the need to preserve a local park), illustrating the diversity of thought that exists within rural communities. One student described the authentic assignment as "writing because you have something to say" (p. 11), echoing the sentiments of Brooke (2003b), who wrote, "When teachers and students jointly connect writing education to their immediate community, to the regional issues that shape that community, and perhaps spiraling out to [the] national and international world, then writing education becomes motivated, active, creative, and effective" (p. x).

**The Role of Motivation**

Although gifted children are often perceived to be highly motivated learners (e.g., Olthouse, 2014; Winner, 2000), researchers (e.g., Bennett-Rappell & Northcote, 2016) have found they sometimes struggle with motivation. Motivation research suggests that students need to feel empowered (Jones, 2018) to make choices in class assignments and to take a personal interest in the subject of study (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). Connecting the curriculum to place by allowing children to write about the places and spaces that are personally meaningful to them may be one way to increase gifted students' motivation for writing (Stanton & Sutton, 2012). In a study involving eighth-grade honors students at a rural high school, Azano (2011) found that shifting the focus of instruction to explicitly emphasize place "granted students an authorial voice, thus giving them license to create their own concepts of place" (p. 7). As part a series of studies about talented writers of different ages, Olthouse (2014) observed and conducted interviews with participants in a summer writing camp for gifted elementary school children. She found that the children were both extrinsically and intrinsically motivated to write, but that as the summer progressed the students began to take more risks in developing their stories to reflect their own personalities more closely, rather than simply adhering to "school" expectations. Olthouse concluded that gifted students of this age needed modeling and guidance, including that of sharing specific examples of complex literature as a scaffold to help them answer challenging writing prompts, even though all of the children studied were avid readers outside of school. The students thrived when allowed to choose their own topics, and they used their writing to showcase humor, visual imagery, and sophisticated syntax, all characteristics of creative writing identified by Piirto (1992).

### Elementary Creative Writing

The focus of school-assigned writing tends to be nonfiction narratives and expository texts (Dyson, 2013; Graves, 1994; Williams, 2005), but students, especially as they mature in their writing capabilities (Atwell, 1998), often express a desire to craft fictional stories as well. “In many classrooms, the child who has moved from writing her own personal narrative to composing an imaginary tale has become a ‘real’ writer” (Graves, 1994, p. 287). Because gifted writers are often avid readers who spend much of their leisure time immersed in literature (Garrett & Moltzen, 2011; Olthouse, 2014), gifted elementary students may be especially inclined to try their hand at narrative fiction writing. Further, programming standards set forth by the National Association for Gifted Children (2019) require that educators of students with gifts and talents create “learning environments that encourage awareness and understanding of interest, strengths, and needs” (p. 1).

Teachers would do well to encourage students’ desires to write creatively during the school day, as practice with different writing genres improves students’ writing overall (Ferlazzo, 2015; Fletcher & Portalupi, 2000; Meier, 2011). In fact, after an extensive meta-analysis of elementary writing instruction practices across many decades, Graham et al. (2012) recommended that students use more creativity in their writing and, in general, that much more instructional time be devoted to practicing writing. Graham et al. also recommended implementing comprehensive writing programs to assist teachers in making instructional decisions for writing.

### Democracy and Creativity as Theoretical Framing

The theoretical framework grounding this research combines Dewey’s (1916/1985) theory of democracy in education and Vygotsky’s (1971) theory of creativity. According to Dewey (1916/1985), increasing curricular relevance depends on students’ access to authentic learning experiences they can connect to their previous knowledge. Place-based pedagogy draws heavily from Dewey’s work. Regarding creativity, Vygotsky (1971) believed creativity is central both to an individual’s development and to the forward momentum needed by society, and as such, artistic pursuits should be valued in schools. Further, creative achievements in any given domain are unlikely—if not impossible—if time and attention are not devoted to teaching children the sign systems and symbols of that domain so they can one day break from the domain and build on it (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). This thinking aligns with Feldman and Fowler’s (1997) theory of nonuniversal development, which asserts that certain abilities, like writing (Olthouse, 2014), are discipline specific, meaning individuals need the support and structure of a field of study to develop them. Thus, this study looked at the way a place-based pedagogy can both increase curricular relevance and foster the development of knowledge in the domain of creative writing for gifted rural elementary students.

## Methods

### Generation of Data

The data for this study were generated as part of a federally funded research project called Promoting PLACE (Place, Literacy, Achievement, Community, Engagement) in Rural Schools (hereafter Promoting PLACE), which had two primary goals: (a) to increase the number of students eligible for gifted services in rural schools by establishing a place-conscious alternative identification process, and (b) to investigate the impact of a place-based curriculum on students’ self-efficacy and achievement in the language arts. Researchers adapted the existing CLEAR (Challenge Leading to Engagement, Achievement, and Results) language arts curriculum for gifted students (Callahan et al., 2017) by incorporating place-based assignments and literature.

Fourteen rural school districts (as defined by population density and proximity to urban areas; National Center for Education Statistics, 2011) were recruited to participate in the Promoting PLACE project. Districts randomly assigned to the treatment condition received a place-based language arts curriculum for third- and fourth-grade gifted students. Students were identified for gifted services either by their school district or by alternative criteria established by Promoting

PLACE, which consisted of locally normed (rather than nationally normed) scores on the verbal portion of the Cognitive Abilities Test (Lohman & Hagen, 2005) and teacher ratings on three of the Scales for Rating the Behavioral Characteristics of Superior Students (Renzulli et al., 2009, 2013) after teachers received professional development on how to use the tool. For the purpose of this substudy, we did not distinguish between stories written by students identified either traditionally or by using alternative criteria. All participating school districts were considered "high need," with at least 50% of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. In third grade, students completed units on poetry and folktales that each included an emphasis on writing. In fourth grade, students completed research and fiction units, and the data for this study included 237 narrative fiction stories composed as the culminating project of the fiction unit. Girls wrote 119 of the stories, and boys wrote 103 of the stories; gender information was missing for 15 students. Because the students in the treatment districts were the only ones to have been taught with the place-based curriculum, we do not have stories written by students in the control group who continued to receive gifted instruction in the usual manner prescribed by their school district (their participation helped establish quantitative differences on measures such as standardized test results that are unrelated to this substudy). Stories were deidentified prior to analysis, so race information for individual students was unavailable; however, three of the districts had primarily White populations, and the other three districts were more racially diverse (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).

**Fiction Unit**

The fiction unit consisted of 17 lessons taught to students either in the general education classroom setting or during gifted pull-out lessons. Each lesson had a different literary focus (e.g., characterization, point of view, imagery) and usually consisted of sharing excerpts from classic and modern children's literature with a discussion of principles of fiction writing, a brief writing exercise, and a discussion of how to incorporate the skill into writing. As an example, Appendix A is an abbreviated version of lesson 2 on setting. The lessons aligned with both Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association, 2010) and the Standards of Learning for Virginia, where most of the participants resided and which require students to "describe how the choice of language, setting, and characterization contributes to the development of a plot" (Virginia Department of Education, 2017). However, research has shown that gifted students need differentiated instruction that goes beyond state standards in promoting higher-level thinking and challenge (e.g., Callahan et al., 2015; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2002).

Hollie (2018) suggested literacy educators make every effort to share literature that represents "authentic cultural experiences" (p. 141) of various cultural groups in meaningful ways. Accordingly, much of the literature shared with students was selected because of its emphasis on place, such as *Walk Two Moons* by Sharon Creech (1994), about a girl who learns about her family's history during a long road trip with her grandparents; *Hoot* by Carl Hiassen (2002), about a group of friends who stop a commercial developer from destroying the home of endangered owls in rural Florida; and *My Side of the Mountain* by Jean Craighead George (1959), about a boy who learns wilderness survival skills after running away to the Catskills Mountains of New York. Choosing to use culturally relevant, place-based literature to teach language arts concepts aligns with the International Literacy Association (2010) standards, which require teachers to "use literature that reflects the experiences of marginalized groups" (element 4.2).

For the final writing assignment, students were asked to combine all the elements of fiction they learned about in the unit (imagery, setting, characterization, etc.) into one coherent fiction narrative. Students could write in any genre they chose (e.g., adventure, fantasy, realistic fiction, science fiction) and were encouraged to be creative and "to use senses, emotions, and images to evoke connections between the text and the reader" (fiction unit, lesson 2). They were given a rubric (see Appendix B) to refer to throughout the writing, revising, and editing processes to ensure they had included all required elements. The curriculum provided three class sessions for students to complete their stories, though teachers were

advised to allow more time if they deemed it necessary.

### Data Analysis

We typed all stories to correct minor spelling and grammar mistakes, hence allowing for low-level inferences. Then, we conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) across multiple iterations to identify and categorize students' descriptions of setting. To ascertain whether the project seemed to mentor students into the field of creative writing (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Feldman & Fowler, 1997) as proposed in our theoretical framework, we focused on identifying detailed descriptions, vivid sensory images, and how the setting aided development of characters and plot. To determine the potential influence of the place-based nature of the curriculum and its potential to increase curricular relevance for students (Dewey, 1916/1985), we also searched for elements of setting specific to students' regional or rural culture, as well as choices students made about setting descriptions. Descriptive coding, which according to Saldaña (2016) "summarizes in a word or short phrase—most often a noun—the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data" (p. 102), was used to make sense of the data, and writing analytic memos helped clarify coding decisions. Using a constant comparative technique (Glaser, 1965; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) allowed for iterative comparisons among stories, coding tables, and memos to look for patterns and to refine the coding categories.

## Thematic Findings

After exhausting the possibility of any new insights, the following salient themes emerged as consistent: rich descriptions of nature, encounters with new surroundings, highlighting specific spaces, depictions of rural communities, and displacement. We first describe our general findings and then discuss each theme in turn. Reading through the entire data set of 237 stories, we made note of each instance in which a rural setting was suggested through references to (a) natural elements (e.g., mountains, creeks), (b) agriculture, (c) communities that may connote rurality (e.g., towns, villages), (d) places within a community (e.g., stores, restaurants), or (e) activities typically associated with rural places (e.g., hunting, fishing). The findings listed in Table 1 show that, when given the opportunity to craft a story in whatever genre they wanted, many students relied on their local communities and natural surroundings as settings, suggesting that they consider place to be an important part of their worldview.

As shown in Table 1, not all stories reflected rurality; some used settings that may or may not have been rural (e.g., the story took place "at home" without an indication of where the home was located), some used distinctly nonrural settings (e.g., large cities), and some used fantastical settings (e.g., outer space).

### Rich Descriptions of Nature

Both Wason-Ellam (2010) and Duke (2016) demonstrated how experiences with nature can enhance elementary students' writing, and this data set included many descriptions of the natural world that revealed its importance to these fourth-grade authors as well. For example, Sally, the protagonist of "Portal to a Unicorn World,"[1] loves "to go outside and search in the woods in her backyard. And she [loves] animals so much that she could keep thousands." Melody, the protagonist of "Mermicorn," has an adventure at a lake that is "very active with fish and other wildlife." In "Magic Is Real," the narrator describes a "crisp and cool evening" in the forest, where "the sounds of all the critters filled the air, the chirping of the crickets, the croaking of the toads in the pond nearby, and the hooting of the owls hunting." Skillfully, the narrator of "The Mythical Forest" opens with these lines:

> I hear the whistling wind. I feel the grass on my legs and I see the wide spread of forest. As I walk through the dark forest, I hear something rustling in the leaves beside me. As I turn, I watch as a small bunny runs by and hops toward the forest.

[1] Most of the story titles given in this article were student generated, but we also assigned titles to several stories that were originally untitled.

**Table 1**

*Types of Settings Used by Rural Gifted Students in Their Culminating Fiction Unit Project*

| Setting | Subsetting | No. |
|---|---|---|
| **Rural settings** | | |
| Natural areas | Woods/forest | 42 |
| | Mountains | 6 |
| | Caves | 8 |
| | Open areas of land (e.g., meadows, fields) | 6 |
| | Trails | 6 |
| | Small Bodies of water (e.g., ponds, lakes) | 9 |
| Agricultural areas | Farms/farmland | 12 |
| | Gardens | 3 |
| Small communities (e.g., towns, villages, neighborhoods) | | 20 |
| Places around town (e.g., hospitals, stores, restaurants) | | 25 |
| Rural activities | Fishing | 4 |
| | Hunting | 7 |
| | Foraging | 2 |
| | Camping | 6 |
| | Farm chores | 3 |
| **Neutral (not necessarily rural) settings** | | |
| "At home" | | 34 |
| "At school" | | 38 |
| No indication of location | | 7 |
| **Nonrural settings** | | |
| Large cities | | 25 |
| Beaches[a] | | 6 |
| Tropical islands | | 9 |
| Ocean/sea[a] | | 10 |
| Military bases/battlefields[a] | | 4 |
| **Fantastical Settings** | | |
| Kingdoms | | 18 |
| Fantasy worlds | | 14 |
| Video game worlds | | 5 |
| Outer space | | 2 |

[a]While beach, ocean, and military references could have been considered rural in some cases, as one of the school sites was located in a seaside area near a military base, they were not categorized as such in this analysis.

The author of "Farm Rainstorm" expertly sets the scene for the story, situating it in a place likely very familiar to her: "It was a boiling hot day in Kentucky. Fourteen-year-old Hannah walked to the barn to do her farm chores. She stopped and felt a breeze. The yellow and green grass swayed. 'It might actually rain!' Hannah said with relief."

A notable description of nature is found in "The Vines Come Alive," showing both a remarkably strong connection between the author and his natural surroundings and a high level of skill with manipulating language to paint a vivid picture of the story's setting:

> I stood on the top of the tall mountain, relishing every minute, every second, every moment. The cool breeze against my face, the wind toying with my umber-colored hair and the warm glow of the sun warming my skin. . . . When I was surrounded by nature, by vines, trees, flowers, valleys, rivers, and the forest teeming with life; when I was far away from everyone. . . .
>
> I sat down. I sat for a long, long time, watching the sun climb slowly up into the sky, its warm glow radiating onto the earth. A rock wren landed beside me, cocking its head. I smiled, watching it as it hopped back and forth before spreading its wings and flying off. I sighed. . . .
>
> My observant eyes and patience caught movements commonly unnoticed. I saw the sparrows collecting twigs and leaves for their nests, leaves falling from trees, squirrels storing nuts for the winter and ants working hard to build homes, bit by bit, one step at a time.

A piece titled "Dew on the Horizon" was not truly a narrative fiction story containing characters and a plot; rather, it was more of a poem about the changing seasons as experienced in the author's place, and it demonstrates the closeness this student felt with the outdoor world:

> As the reddish, yellow sun came up on the fall horizon, I saw dew sticking on the ground, the trees, and the faded black panels of my backyard shed. The dew looked like it was dancing on the things it was stuck to. It was one elegant sight indeed. I saw many other great things, squirrels running up and down the trees and birds tending to their young. . . . The animals are preparing for winter and storing all their food. Soon, they will go to sleep and continue the circle of life.

**Encounters With New Surroundings**

Many times in these stories, the characters find themselves in unfamiliar places, and the authors impressively described the new surroundings through the characters' eyes. For example, in the historical fiction story "The Path to Freedom," Jacque is a French youth seeking a new life in America after having woken up in an alleyway with "no last name and no money." He boards a ship, described as follows:

> The inside was brightly-lit and the floor had a red carpet. . . . On a table to my left was a map of the ship. I picked it up and looked at it. I saw that I was near the dining room and the first-class rooms. . . . The map said the entrance to go there was on the other side of the ship, so I started to walk in that direction. After a lot of walking and getting lost a few times, I got there. . . . It was beautiful. The water was as clear as the blue sky and there was a gentle breeze.

Later that night, Jacque must find a hidden place to sleep, and he remembers the tarp-covered lifeboats he noticed during his earlier exploration. When he arrives in New York City, Jacque still has no place to call his own, but kind strangers eventually rescue him from perpetual displacement by welcoming him into their family and home.

In "The Trouble Maker," Tiana is a misunderstood preteen who has alienated her family, her teachers, and her classmates after repeatedly failing to follow social norms. As a result, she is sent away to a boot camp for troubled youth, and in her description of Tiana's first impressions of the place, the author juxtaposes Tiana's internal conflict—the shame she feels at having been sent to such a place—against the sensory details of the natural surroundings she can't seem to avoid noticing, even in her distress:

> As we got closer, there were more trees, and the road started to get bumpier. Finally, we arrived at boot camp. My boot camp teacher greeted me with a simple, "Hello, how are you?" I didn't answer any of her questions. I just wanted to crawl back into the van and go back home. I didn't even make eye contact [or] look at the other kids, I just looked down in shame. There was a breeze blowing in the trees. A squirrel caught my attention as it was leaping from tree to tree. A frog jumped on my leg.

The protagonist of "Dragonwings," Dawn, is a young dragon about to embark on a journey to the Altar of Darkness for "historic research," an apparent rite of passage among her dragon community. The author does a remarkable job of

describing the uneasiness Dawn feels upon preparing to leave her familiar surroundings for an unknown place:

> Dawn walked through her cave at Mt. Emerald. Sunlight streamed through the holes in the ceiling. She rummaged through her storage chest. *Let's see*, Dawn thought as she put items in her bag. Fruit, cloak, and a scroll with info about where they were going. . . . Dawn shook out her wings and took a deep breath. Then she swished her curtain open and met her friends outside.

The story "Cardinal's Journey" featured a male cardinal as a protagonist who must endure a harrowing ordeal to protect his partner from a "rogue hunter" who was invading their habitat, but unlike Tiana and Dawn in the previous examples, he does not have time to entertain any trepidation he might feel:

> The cardinal tried to lure away the hunter. He flew deeper and deeper and further and further away from his home. Little did he or the hunter know they were heading straight into a blizzard. Suddenly, a frigid blast of the coldest air blew him to the ground. He lay there unconscious until morning. He awoke under a pile of snow with only his beak showing. He jumped out of the snow, surprised to find frost on his wings. He tried to shake off the frost so he could fly, but it didn't work. He sat in the sun, which warmed his feathers and thawed his frost. He was able to fly home to his beloved wife.

This story not only demonstrates the student author's skill in describing a scene using powerful details like "a frigid blast of the coldest air," but it also shows strong evidence of his rural knowledge about hunting regulations when, at the end of the story, the hunter is arrested for pursuing a state bird. Similarly, the author of "My Lucky Day" demonstrates his own understanding of the rules of hunting when he describes how his protagonist's uncle stops him from shooting a buck during his first hunting trip:

> While we were walking in the woods, I saw a 12-pointer and whispered, "Look." We all saw the deer, but the deer did not see us. I was about to shoot it, but my uncle didn't let me.
>
> "Why can't I shoot it?" I said.
>
> "Because this section isn't my land."

The narrator goes on to describe "the best hunting spot ever," which included a hunting stand that was so well camouflaged the boy did not even see it at first.

**Highlighting Specific Spaces**

In many stories, the authors established the tone for their stories by including distinct details about very specific spaces. For example, in "Cruise Ship Disaster," when teenage brothers Paul and Jeff sneak aboard the ship on which their parents are vacationing, they hide behind a safe in the stateroom's closet, first arranging one set of clean blankets on which to lie and folding a second set to use as pillows. From this position, the boys overhear their parents' plans. While the same plot point could have been accomplished by simply stating that they hid in the closet, the addition of the extra details about the blankets and safe help the reader visualize the story and understand that the boys are somewhat finicky about ensuring they have a relatively comfortable place in which to hide out. Similarly, in "The Vengeful Twins," Jamie sits in his "tattered green armchair, drinking a cup of coffee" while he waits for his evil sister, Jane, to come confront him during a violent thunderstorm. The addition of these small details shows the reader that Jamie is calm and steady, in sharp contrast to his twin, whose cruel ways and heightened emotions were detailed previously in the story. The sophisticated way these young authors describe small details about the setting to establish the story's tone and characters' personalities strongly suggests their potential to become accomplished creative writers one day. The opportunity provided by the Promoting PLACE intervention to develop and practice these skills under a teacher's guidance aligns with Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) notion of the necessity of learning a field (in this case, creative writing) to be able to innovate in that field later on.

The description of the path and front entrance of the school two sisters are about to explore in "Haunted School" helps the reader understand that trouble lies ahead: "It took about thirty minutes to go

down the deserted stone path, with cracks in the stones. We reached the school and we both looked up at the tall, broken, broken, broken bricks, and vines hanging from a banner." In "Mannequin School," another story about children venturing into an abandoned school building, the author describes how a group of four friends decides exactly where they will sleep within the "least moldy" classroom they could find:

> Molly was going to sleep in the corner by the chalkboard. John was going to sleep by the window in case he needed to get out in an emergency. Billy was going to sleep by the old, dusty rocking chair. He sat in it and one of the legs completely broke off. Joyce was going to sleep by the old bookshelf. She pulled a book off the shelf and blew on it to get the dust off. It said that it was published in 1887.

Joyce not only notices the book was dusty, but she also blows off the dust to reveal the book's publication date, a tiny detail that both adds depth to the story and provides a meaningful clue about the predicament in which the children later find themselves. In a different scene set in the school's vast library, Molly, who is blind, finds a book written in Braille titled *How to Train Your Horse*, which once again adds a layer of detail (a realistic title for a book written in the late 1800s) above and beyond what one might expect of a fourth-grade writer.

In a story called "The Bridge," another author foreshadows a later discovery—that the "older man dressed like a farmer" whom the protagonist meets on a stormy night is really a ghost—by describing the paint on his old farmhouse as "weathered and chipping off" and the porch as looking "like someone would fall right through it." In "Bootsy's Adventures," another dilapidated building is described as "a worn-out barn with cracked windows" that "looked like it was about to fall at any moment." Bootsy, an almost-grown cat, remarks that the inside of the structure was "the perfect setting to watch a horror movie," once again setting the stage for troubling events.

The author of "Family Always Comes First" uses the description of a ghost's home to reveal information about him; the personality of his new friend, Maria, who is seeing the house for the first time; and the tension between Maria and her brother, Jack, whom she has left behind in the human world:

> Bob lived in a small cottage with hundreds of wood carvings piled to the ceiling and surrounding the charming cottage. For carving wood is what he loved to do. That, and of course, making and eating ice cream.
>
> When they arrived at the cottage, Maria was amazed. All she wanted to do was stare. The wonderfully careless cottage was like a vacation from her tidy brother Jack.
>
> "Your cottage is amazing!" said Maria.
>
> "You really like it?" Bob said cheerfully.
>
> "No, Bob, I love it," said Maria.
>
> Bob's cheeks turned rosy red, and with that, they headed into the cottage to enjoy some homemade ice cream.

Rather than living in a dusty, abandoned home more typical of literary ghosts, the author reveals Bob's whimsical personality by describing his handcrafted carvings, his love of culinary ice cream pursuits, and the bashful pride he shows when Maria compliments his home. "Wonderfully careless" is an inventive way to describe Bob's unique style, and the fact that Maria enjoys being there so much because it is "like a vacation from her tidy brother" clues the reader into the opposing personality traits that cause conflict between the two siblings.

The author of "Hill Valley Kingdom" embeds rural values into his story about a dedicated royal servant who relies on his wilderness knowledge to forge past multiple obstacles to protect the king during a hostile takeover by an evil warlock. Before embarking on his treacherous journey, Brandon thinks to grab his cloak, his bow and arrow, a "deer knife," and some leftover deer meat. He uses the meat to distract a hungry wolf, the knife to kill some ominous snakes, and the cloak to protect his body from angry bees. When some of the bees do sting him, he uses "salve from a thistle" to ease the pain. Upon arriving at the castle, Brandon steadies his bow and arrow, draws back, and aims for the evil warlock's amulet, which he hits on the first try, saving the day for the whole kingdom. Clearly, by sharing such detailed descriptions of his character's ability to navigate through the woods using hunting

tools and a keen understanding of the plants and animals he encounters, the author communicates his appreciation for these representations of his own rural place, thus demonstrating Dewey's (1916/1985) ideas about how centering the curriculum in place can help students connect with school assignments.

**Depictions of Rural Communities**

Azano (2011) described how one rural English teacher and his students shared an idealized view of their community, with the teacher explaining that the community is made up of "neighbors, family members, and friends who are readily available to lend help when it is needed" (p. 5) and people who always greet each other with a friendly wave. Several students in this study depicted the communities in their stories in a similar manner, such as in "A Breakup in the Woods," when the narrator describes the fictional small town of Skyville as being "known for everybody to be happy and kind." Another example of a lovely community is Unicorpia, a "happy forest" full of fluffy pink trees where "everyone and everything was so joyful. Nothing was sad or hateful. Everyone got along just fine. It was perfect. Nothing ever went wrong" ("The Adventures of Unicorpia, Book One"). Similarly, the narrator of "The Night Is Against You" sets the scene for the story as follows:

> Long ago, it was a normal day in the town of Hanfed. The newspaper boy was in the middle of his morning shift, every townsperson was out greeting each other even if they did not know the person they were greeting. The town of Hanfed was a small town right next to the woods. It had a population of only about 60 people, so when a woman in the town had a baby, everyone would come to the baby shower.

The description of the whole community gathering for a baby shower is strikingly similar to the way Heath (1983) describes women of all generations gathering to shower new mothers with gifts and advice in her classic ethnography of two rural communities.

In the fantastical tale of "The Ol' Cracken," Captain Gray Beard gathers the community at "the tallest conifer tree on the island" to discuss how to solve the problem of the "Ol' Cracken," a sea monster who has been attacking ships for years: "At around 7:30, everyone from the island showed up, which looked to be about 30 people because it was a very small island." After they pulled together and defeated the monster, "they all met back up at the conifer tree for a great celebration. They had a colossal feast. There was music and dancing around a warm fire. They celebrated ['til] into the morning as elation filled the air."

"Hill Valley Kingdom" was set in a land ruled by a king who "used his crown for the good of his people and his kingdom. With the help of his crown, he made sure the crops grew, there was enough food for everyone, and no one was sick. The kingdom was peaceful." In "The Meaning of the Necklace," the author promotes the virtue of an honest day's labor, a value typically embraced as part of rural culture (Azano, 2011). The story's two princess characters extoll the virtues of hard, physical work "in the fields" when, during a long search for a magic necklace that would transform one of them into the queen of the land, they stop to live "alongside all the poor people" for a while and then decide to stay permanently. "They worked hard, and knew what hunger was, and how life could be so difficult, but people loved them so much that they came to be very happy." The people they meet in the humble village treat the princesses with kindness, which in turn leads them to appreciate a simpler way of life.

**Displacement**

Like the story of Jacque in "The Path to Freedom," discussed above, several stories involved a character moving or having just moved to a new place, and in each situation, characters struggle either to say goodbye to the place they had lived or to adjust to the new place. For example, in "The Turn on the Bullies," Bob is a boy whose family has moved repeatedly, and on his first day of school in their new town he witnesses a group of bullies harassing another student. In that moment, Bob chooses to align himself with the boy who was bullied rather than the group of bullies, thereby asserting agency by choosing to shape his role in his new place into that of protector. In some stories,

(e.g., "BFF Moves to China"), it is the protagonist's friend who moves away, and the anxiety felt by the character left behind demonstrates another way students feel the people around them shape their sense of place. Without the home and people they are used to, their characters feel lost, and they need to find a way to construct a sense of connectedness to their new place.

In another story, "Moving to L.A.," a young girl, Crissy, is alarmed when her parents suddenly announce their family will be moving from Sacramento to Los Angeles. Crissy feels powerless when her parents shut down all conversation about the move before she has any time to process the news. In moving to Los Angeles, Crissy has to say goodbye to her friends and teachers—the community that makes up a "place" as much as the actual physical surroundings (Azano, 2011; Brooke, 2003a; Esposito, 2012). Leaving her school for the last time, Crissy looks back sadly at the rock where she used to sit and eat yogurt with her friends, as if to acknowledge that this space she values no longer belongs to her.

Additionally, there were dozens of stories in which characters suddenly move from one place to another via teleportation. For example, in "Off to Australia," Ruby is on vacation with her father when she falls through a portal, eventually landing in "some type of mystical land." Similarly, in "The Mystical Forest," Julie meets a fairy in the woods and follows her to a tree that turns out to be a portal to a magical world. In each case, the characters who have teleported feel unease at their sudden shift in place and must quickly adjust. In most of these stories, the characters have an adventure in this new place and then eventually return to the safety and familiarity of home. In fact, 46 of the 237 stories (19%) involved characters embarking on both voluntary and involuntary adventures and then ending up safely "back home." The idea that so many students used a sense of displacement as a central problem to be resolved in their stories echoes and supports previous research indicating place is a critical component of identity (e.g., Azano, 2011; Brooke, 2003a; Donovan, 2016; Jacobs, 2011; Sobel, 1996).

## Discussion: Promising Practices

Vygotsky (1971) theorized that creativity was crucial to the development of both the individual and of the society to which the individual belongs. According to Vygotsky, creative practices like the ones undertaken by student participants in this project allow for growth and change, disrupting societal inertia and forcing us "to strive beyond our life toward all that lies beyond it" (p. 253). Creative projects like the one discussed in this article provide gifted students opportunities to consider different ways of being and knowing they may not otherwise have. This is especially important for rural gifted students, who "may be at risk for not having their academic needs met" (Azano, 2014a, p. 299) and who deserve every opportunity to be challenged creatively.

Dyson (2008) wrote that "as children participate in social activities involving text, they come to anticipate not only written language's functional possibilities, but also locally valued ways of doing, being, and relating to others" (p. 121). Because students were taught to understand place as a valuable part of their identities through the reading, writing, and class discussions embedded in the Promoting PLACE curriculum, and because they explored place-related concepts in their descriptions of setting, this study supports Dyson's assertion by demonstrating the importance of connecting language arts instruction to rural students' sense of place.

Further, according to Dyson (2013), "Writing is never an individual production. Rather, it is always socially organized in cultural time and space, and it is also always a response to a landscape of others' voices" (p. 76). Thus, this study supports research showing that literature shared with students as part of their language arts learning is reflected in their writing (e.g., Calkins, 2003; McKay et al., 2017; Muhammad, 2020). It is beneficial to share books in which students are interested, and one of the premises of the larger Promoting PLACE project, of which this study is a part, was that rural students would be interested in literature with a focus on place. Because many of the students' descriptions of setting were so strong, this study indicates that a place-based curriculum emphasizing literature set

in rural spaces may have helped foster the development of such impressive writing. Therefore, rural literacy educators may want to consider curating gifted students' in-school reading experiences in such a way as to inspire their students as writers. Further, to bolster their own repertoires of place-based literature so they will be able to recommend stories to their gifted students, rural teachers can consult literacy journals, attend reading conferences, and seek help from school librarians (Azano, 2014b). Additionally, they can advocate for a predeveloped place-based language arts curriculum to follow with gifted students, such as the one used in this project, which previous research has shown to be "more likely to produce improvements in student growth" than models that only provide a guide in developing daily lessons (Plucker & Callahan, 2014, p. 395).

The type of creative writing described in this study, according to Dobson and Stephenson (2017), is best nurtured when the task and learning environment are simultaneously structured and flexible. In this case the writing assignment was structured (it included a rubric to follow) but with embedded flexibility (students could craft a creative story in whatever genre they chose). This pedagogical balance between structure and freedom, then, "provide[s] textual space for writers to enact different identities" (Dobson & Stephenson, 2017, p. 162). In other words, providing space and time for students to create stories as they did during this project is valuable for gifted rural students' growth as literate individuals in the midst of the ongoing process of identity formation. It is valuable, too, for enhancing their connections both to the larger literate world and to the social world of their own classrooms, which are each situated within a particular local context.

## Conclusion

Of the younger students she observed in her ethnographic studies of elementary writing, Dyson (2013) wrote, "The children were not only socialized into official practices, but they also exercised agency; they used familiar frames of reference—familiar practices—to give these new school demands relevance and meaning in their ongoing lives" (p. 164). This study extends Dyson's findings to the context of place-based writing instruction with gifted rural fourth graders: students were socialized into official writing practices (addressing state standards for writing), exercised agency (choosing what type of stories to write and crafting the stories' outcomes), and used familiar frames of reference (connections to rurality and place) to give the school demands (the mastery of writing skills) relevance and meaning to their lives.

In her study of talented elementary writers, Olthouse (2014) found they were strongly influenced by their teachers, who offered useful conceptual and technical feedback on their writing and encouraged them to pursue opportunities to continue developing their writing talent. Rural students with immense talent, like the authors of some of these stories, should be encouraged to enter writing contests and to apply for scholarships that provide direct support for writing or for attendance at writing camps. Their future teachers should be alerted to their aptitude for writing so they can continue to cultivate and nurture it. In that way, students, having learned and internalized the symbols within the domain of creative writing, would be capable of contributing to the domain one day in the manner described by Csikszentmihalyi (1996). These children, after all, are our future authors! Among them might be the next Willa Cather, Jesmyn Ward, Louise Erdrich, Jason Reynolds, or Carl Hiassen. By nurturing these gifts and teaching them to write from a perspective that values place, teachers of gifted rural students prepare and empower them to tell their own stories—to "construct authentic rural narratives that honor the complexities of rural people and places" (Azano, 2014b, p. 62).

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## Appendix A

Promoting PLACE, Lesson 2 (Abbreviated)

**Big Idea:** Writers use senses, emotions, and images to evoke connections between the text and the reader.

**OBJECTIVES:**

- Use evidence from text to support opinions
- Make personal connections to fictional narratives
- Respond to a prompt creatively and thoughtfully
- Use descriptive language appropriately

**Important Vocabulary**

***Setting*:** "The time, place, and circumstances in which a narrative, drama, or film takes place." (*American Heritage Dictionary*)

Allow 5–10 minutes for students to respond to the following writing prompt:
*Choose one of the five senses. In approximately 100 words, describe what you had for lunch today*.

When students finish, have them take some time to look over their work and consider any revisions they might want to make (e.g., look for ways to use more imagery, use stronger words, incorporate the perspective from another sense if they are ready, etc.).

**INTRODUCTION: What Is Setting?**

*Now we're going to move on to our next area of focus: setting*. *How do we define* ***setting*** *again?* (Allow for responses.) *In fiction, we sometimes use time and places that are real, and sometimes we use time and places that are made up. Even though we can use real times and places in fiction, we always make up what happens to the characters. Keep this in mind as we read this passage from* A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.

**APPLICATION: Setting**

Invite students to find a comfortable place for listening. Remind students to enjoy the way the passage sounds but to listen for details about the setting, particularly any sensory imagery they notice.

Project the first passage from *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. Read it out loud to students. Make sure you highlight the idea of resiliency, which is key to the setting. Explain how overcoming obstacles like the difficult background and inequality (shown in the description of the neighborhood) is seen through the tree. This makes it a symbol of resiliency. Ask: *In what ways are we like the tree? What examples of resiliency do you have from your own life?*

Ask: *What is our setting? How does is it different from where Francie lives? How is it the same?* Make a list of students' responses, either on a SMART Board template that you can save or on a piece of chart paper that you can use again in the next lesson.

## Appendix B

Promoting PLACE Fiction Scoring Rubric

| | You need to go back to the drawing board | You need multiple revisions | You need one more revision | Your work is publishable! |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Alignment** **NOTE: "**story elements" refers to all the elements listed below! | None of the story elements are consistent or make sense. | Some of the story elements are consistent and make sense. | Most of the story elements are consistent and make sense. | All the story elements are consistent and make sense. |
| Characters[a] | There are no characters developed enough to be a protagonist/antagonist/ stock character. | The protagonist/ antagonist are underdeveloped. The stock character serves no purpose. | The protagonist/ antagonist are identifiable. The stock character has a debatable purpose. | The protagonist/ antagonist are well developed. The stock character serves a clear purpose. |
| Characterization | Either direct or indirect characterization is missing. | There is an uneven balance between direct and indirect characterization that is distracting to the reader. | The direct and/or indirect characterization are developed but inconsistent. | Both direct and indirect characterization are consistent and well developed. |
| Conflict | There is no major conflict. | The major conflict is unclear. | The major conflict is identifiable. | The major conflict is clearly identifiable and well-developed. |
| Dialogue | There is no dialogue, even when it would be relevant. | There is dialogue, but there are issues with punctuation. | The dialogue does not seem authentic to the characters. | The dialogue flows well and is authentic to the characters. |
| Imagery | There is no imagery. | The imagery is confusing and does not seem related to story elements. | The imagery does not always fit with the other story elements. | The imagery fits well with the other story elements. |
| Plot | The plot is hard to follow. | There are gaps in the plot. | There are minor points of confusion in the plot. | The plot is clear and easy to follow. |
| Point of view | The point of view switches narrators at random. | The point of view inconsistent and confusing at times. | The point of view is clear, though there are minor issues with consistency. | The point of view is clear and consistent. |
| Publication details (e.g., cover, title page, dedication, author biography) | The publication elements are missing or completely incorrect. | The publication elements are incorrect. | The publication elements are misleading (inconsistent between content of story and what is presented). | The publication elements are clearly marketing the story appropriately. |
| Setting | The setting is never clarified. | There are missing details about the setting, without a reason. | Some details of the setting are inconsistent. | The setting is clear and consistent. |

[a] Not all students will have stock character(s) in their stories. Disregard the rubric section about this element if they do not.

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# Young, Gifted, Black . . . and Country: A Community Situated Approach to Analyzing Black, Rural Giftedness in Contemporary Nonfiction Children's Literature

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This article shares findings from a critical content analysis of five contemporary nonfiction children's books. Each book centers on a gifted Black historical figure who spent at least part of their childhood in a rural setting. The analysis, using a funds-of-knowledge and community-cultural-wealth approach, revealed the situated nature of the child's giftedness, including intersectional oppression they faced, various ways they enacted giftedness within their rural setting, and a reciprocal relationship with their community. In each book, the youth's giftedness was supported by the community but also positively impacted the community.

***Keywords*:** gifted Black students in nonfiction literature, rural Black youth in nonfiction literature

In 1969, the incomparable Nina Simone recorded and released the powerful call to attention, "To Be Young, Gifted and Black," in which she exclaimed, "In the whole world you know, there are a billion boys and girls who are young, gifted and Black, and that's a fact!" More than fifty years later, important concerns remain about the identification, support, and celebration of gifted Black youth (Henshon, 2020). These concerns are heightened further when considering that *rural*, gifted Black youth are doubly affected by a context in which they are "more likely to be less proportionally represented than their suburban and city counterparts" (Gentry et al., 2019, p. 98). This is not a new phenomenon, yet it deserves emergency attention from the field of gifted education.

All rural gifted students may be inhibited by several key challenges. Notably, there is an urban-rural excellence gap that affords urban students more opportunities for enrichment and cultivation than available to those in rural areas (Hernández-Torrano, 2018). Even once placed into gifted education programs, students in rural areas experience fewer engaging learning opportunities compared to their peers in urban areas (Howley et al., 2009). Additionally, historically under-represented populations in rural areas are denied access to gifted education programs at rates higher than in other areas (University of Connecticut, 2013). In a study of 462 school districts, the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented found that only about half of the districts had exact alignment between the percentage of Black children enrolled in the district and the percentage represented in gifted education programs (University of Connecticut 2013). Programs designed to increase access for such students do work, but they are scarce (Pendarvis & Wood, 2009). Exploration of the diverse resources that can benefit underrepresented gifted populations (e.g., Jones & Hébert, 2012) and programs to support teacher identification of underrepresented gifted populations (Lewis & Novak, 2019; Lewis et al., 2018) are among the most promising trends to combat the intersectional barriers that rural, gifted

Black youth face in receiving high-quality gifted education. In both these approaches, children's literature should be carefully considered as an important resource to improve teacher education and to improve the education that rural, gifted Black youth receive. Children's books are arguably the most popular pedagogical resource among elementary teachers; thus, they offer an access point for teachers and other authorities to consider new lenses to understand giftedness.

Through a community-situated approach, the findings shared from this content analysis illuminate how contemporary nonfiction children's literature about rural, gifted Black youth might help children and educators see giftedness in Black, rural children in new ways. In particular, we highlight how the texts situate giftedness within rural communities' funds of knowledge (González et al., 2006) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005).

## Literature Review

### Contemporary Nonfiction Children's Literature

Contemporary nonfiction children's literature is the result of the evolution of literature trends cultivated by larger societal trends (Graff & Shimek, 2020). It is also rooted in older conceptions of informational text. How informational text is used in schools has changed over time. The underuse of the genre was documented in Nell Duke's (2000) groundbreaking study, which found that her first-grade participants were exposed to an average of 3.6 minutes per day of informational text. Duke classified informational texts into three categories: informational, narrative-informational, and informational-poetic. Each category shares a common set of features, including its "function to communicate information about the natural or social world, typically from one presumed to be more knowledgeable on the subject to one presumed to be less so" (p. 205). Today, children in primary classrooms are no strangers to informational text in the post-Common Core State Standards era, which heralded a marked shift in the types of texts privileged in classrooms around the United States (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Notably, the core standards challenged the tradition of emphasizing narrative texts in primary classrooms and shifted more focus to informational texts. Essentially, informational texts are designed to help the reader learn more about a topic, and in the era of contemporary nonfiction children's literature, that fundamental component remains true (Graff & Shimek, 2020).

While contemporary nonfiction children's literature often combines text structures and genre features, it may also challenge oppression and highlight ways for children to enact social justice (Graff & Shimek, 2020). Graff and Shimek's (2020) argument supporting use of nonfiction children's literature in this way is partially grounded in Rosenblatt's (1978/1994) transactional reader-response theory; they argue that new ways of thinking about informational texts change the reader's position along the reading continuum. According to Rosenblatt, a reader moves along an efferent-aesthetic continuum: reading for comprehension is an efferent stance, and reading for enjoyment is an aesthetic stance. A reader may move along the continuum in any given text, but classroom informational texts that focus on the "what" or "who" of a topic will be largely efferent. This distinction in purposes for reading is important for those who want children to consider a critical stance when reading informational text because explorations of critical issues are not aligned with standardized questions and answers that dominate many literacy experiences with informational text (see Graff & Shimek, 2020).

### Black Representation and Nonfiction Children's Literature

In addition to requiring a shift in stance, critical explorations of children's literature also require access to texts that feature people of color as protagonists. In a survey of over 5,000 trade books for children published in 1962–1964, Larrick (1965) found that only 6.7% included one or more Black figures, and of these, "many show only one or two dark faces in a crowd" (p. 2). Since then, there have been some improved metrics in diverse children's book publishing (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2019), but despite scholarly attention, sparse representation of Black people in children's books remains a problem (Koss, 2015).

Gilton (2020) explains that Black people have been stereotyped and continue to be

underrepresented in children's literature. Moreover, biographies of Black Americans have often been limited, as the publishing industry historically has been reluctant to feature a broad range of accomplished people of color. Gilton explains that, despite a dramatic increase in the number of children's books about and written by people of color, as of 2017 only "24 percent of children's books published in the United States were about people of color and 14 percent were by authors and illustrators of color" (p. 92). Thus, children of color are still not equitably represented in text.

### Giftedness and Nonfiction Children's Literature

Representation in nonfiction children's literature might be especially important in gifted education because of the long-standing practice of bibliotherapy. *Bibliotherapy*, as described by Halsted (2009), is a process by which readers identify with one of more figures in the text, experience cathartic and emotional reaction to the text, apply their life situation to that of the figure in the text, and universalize their experience by understanding that their experiences are often shared by others. Bibliotherapy has been recognized as an effective strategy to nurture the social and emotional development of gifted students but relies on the identification of texts where gifted students can identify with main characters (Schlichter & Burke, 1994). Ford et al. (2000) advocated for particular benefits of bibliotherapy for gifted Black youth and identified 10 books with gifted Black protagonists as resources for bibliotherapy. However, none of their choices were nonfiction literature and thus did not provide interdisciplinary opportunities to also learn more about particular content topics (e.g., history, science). Other limitations also exist when identifying giftedness in literature because of the stereotypes and myths about giftedness in the media (Cross, 2005).

### Rural Contexts and Nonfiction Children's Literature

Defining ruralness is a complex process that involves considering administrative, land use, and economic concepts; many experts do not agree on what constitutes a rural designation (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008). Even through disagreements, stakeholders concur that rural areas need support in a variety of areas, as evidenced by the creation of the Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI) and its subsequent actions designed to support facets of rural life such as education and economics (RUPRI, 2020). For this study, we define *rural* as areas where people live and work in largely agricultural and low-population-density areas, and we recognize that rural communities, although not monolithic, often share common values and practices, such as sense of place, family, tradition, spirituality, differing definitions of success, and community (Stambaugh & Wood, 2016).

While stereotyping of rural community members is widespread, the RUPRI (2020) affirms the assets of people in rural areas in its vision statement: "Rural people and places have the resources and capacities to create strong, viable, meaningful, and sustainable futures that can both withstand and turn to advantage the forces of globalization and economic, demographic, and social change" (para. 3). It is this multifaceted perspective that speaks against stereotypes of rural residents often represented in children's literature. Gilton's (2020) account of the history of children's literature in the United States situates it within historical contexts that include poor educational resources in rural areas, particularly in the south. For example, according to Gilton, no public schools were available in the Southern United States until after the Civil War. Access to education for people of color was inequitable for the next century and in many ways continues to be so today.

Arguably, the isolation and lack of access to formalized education and newer technologies contributed to stereotypes of rural community members. Regardless of the reasons, stereotypes about rural people have been pervasive in literature. People who were rural and Black were often portrayed as lacking intelligence in children's literature, as documented by Harris (1990), who researched the first 100 years of literature that includes African Americans. The rural region of Appalachia in particular is portrayed in children's books with limited and deficit-oriented stereotypes of the region, including the misrepresentation of Appalachia as all White (Brashears, 2012). However, some nonfiction texts gently respond to

monolithic-type misconceptions of the region (Brashears, 2012; Chick, 2003). When they go unquestioned, imagined representations of rural areas as all White can cultivate othering within rural communities (Neal & Walters, 2008), and lack of any representation of the rich resources and giftedness in rural spaces is detrimental to a fair vision of rurality.

### Intersectional Rural, Black, and Gifted Identities in Nonfiction Children's Literature

As complex beings in complex social structures, children are situated within systems of power that identify them as Black, gifted, and rural all at once. Even the youngest of children perform their intersectional identities by participating in multiple discourses simultaneously that signify their belonging or nonbelonging to various groups (Kustatscher, 2017). While rural, Black gifted youth may see one aspect of their identities represented in discourses around them, such as children's nonfiction literature, they are unlikely to find mirrors of their intersectional identities. For example, while increases in representation of Black figures might make it easier to find books that mirror their racial identity, when seeking books that center on rural, Black people in positive ways the challenges are compounded. Finding a book about a Black person who is rural and also gifted is nearly impossible. Certainly, many young, gifted Black children live in rural areas, but they are not likely to see themselves in their classroom libraries. Extensive research has been done on the importance of seeing ones' self in the text and on the importance of seeing others as prominent, positive figures. Bishop's (1990) landmark work highlights the notion of windows and mirrors. She posits children should be able to see the world outside of themselves through books that act as windows, and children should also see their own lives reflected through books that act as mirrors.

> When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. (p ix)

This quote illustrates the ability of literature to illuminate the intersectional nature of identity. When we find mirrors in our windows, we find the spaces and borders (Anzaldúa, 1987) between our own intersectional identities and others (Crenshaw, 1990).

Excluding books about young, gifted Black children from classrooms inhibits every child's capacity for change, and it harms those children who are already marginalized. Additionally, it prevents teachers and other authority figures from also participating in discourses that make space for Black, rural, gifted intersectional identities. Books that illuminate these identities instead of excluding or ignoring them should be sought out and examined for their potential as mirrors, windows, and sliding doors (Bishop, 1990) in gifted and general education. This article shares findings of a critical content analysis of five contemporary nonfiction children's books to understand their representation of rural, Black, gifted youth and their potential as mirrors, windows, and sliding doors in gifted education.

## Methodology

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that inspired our initial engagement with the research question and guided our research process assumes a social construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). Within this position, we further focus on the research by employing concepts of intersectionality, rurality, giftedness, funds of knowledge, and community cultural wealth (see Figure 1).

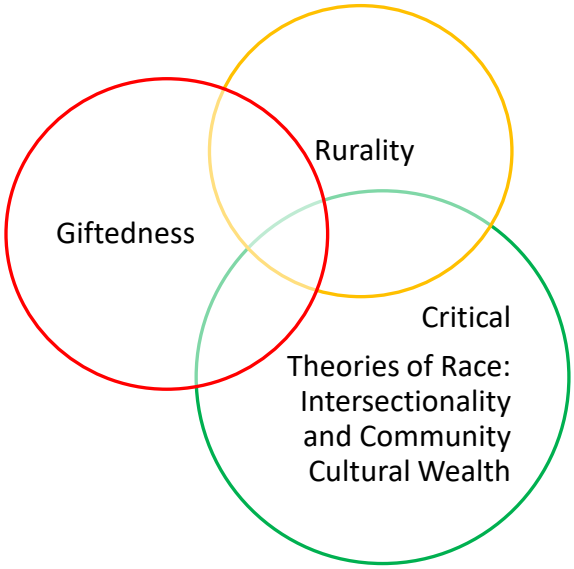
#### *Critical Theories of Race and Intersectionality*

While critical theories of race are not monolithic (Gottesman, 2016), they originated in legal theory (Bell, 1995), and most critical theories of race share several axioms, assumptions, or tenets (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Race is historically and socially constructed and organizes people into a system of hierarchy. Race is ubiquitous, unstable, and ocular; it transforms time and again to reform racial meanings in order to keep systems of hierarchy intact (Omi & Winant, 2014). Race is also an oppression that interacts with other social identities to create intersectional forms of oppression

(Crenshaw, 1990). Critical ideas about race, in particular, the theory of intersectionality, were employed as a theoretical lens in this content analysis.

Figure 1

*Theoretical Frameworks Used in This Study*




*Note:* Critical theories of race, including intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1990) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), were used to understand the intersections of giftedness and rurality in the texts.

### *Rurality*

Similar to race and, as described below, giftedness, there is no singular or monolithic meaning to *rurality*, which "is defined relationally, within a shifting context that includes scale" (Kingsolver, 2017, p. 219). Conceptions of rural spaces range from human to nonhuman, cultural to political. In addition to an overarching theoretical stance assuming the social construction of knowledge, we employ a "minor theory" of rurality as advocated by Cloke (2006) and described by Katz (1996) as "interstitial" and "a way of working through the contradictions and limits more imaginatively" (p. 490). By layering rurality onto our theoretical lens in this way, we hope to illuminate the implications of rurality in this research that expose the "complex interweaving of power relations, social conventions, discursive practices and institutional forces which are constantly combining and recombining" (Cloke, 2006, p. 24) in rural settings. Therefore, the lens of rurality was employed as a focus through which we understand the content of the books, as well as understanding race and giftedness within it.

### *Giftedness*

There is no singular definition of giftedness within the field of gifted education (Reis & Renzulli, 2010). Traditional definitions and theories of giftedness "are normed and conceptualized on middle class whites" (Wright et al., 2017, p. 51). More critical frameworks of giftedness no longer focus giftedness solely on a high IQ and instead encompass a variety of behavioral characteristics (Henshon, 2020). When selecting texts for the content analysis, we employed Renzulli's (1978)

theory of creative-productive giftedness that describes those aspects of human activity and involvement where a premium is placed on the development of original ideas, products, artistic expressions, and areas of knowledge that are purposefully designed to have an impact on one or more target audiences. (Renzulli, 1999, p. 9)

This theory served as a basis for the Enrichment Triad Model (Renzulli, 1977), in which type III enrichment activities (individual projects) are when "students use real-world methods of inquiry to become 'first-hand investigators' in the particular area in which they choose to work" (Renzulli, 1977, p. 232). This part of the model was also part of the framework in which we selected and analyzed books.

However, a second theoretical stance on giftedness allowed us to see these aspects of giftedness and gifted activities not as merely individual phenomena but as situated knowledge, behaviors, and activities. In addition to the conceptual shift of giftedness from IQ to creative-productive, there has also been a stark shift from understanding giftedness as natural aptitudes to understanding it as behaviors impacted by various environmental factors. In fact, some writers have gone so far as to frame giftedness through a lens that identifies only the privileges and opportunities afforded to an individual. Syed (2010) wrote, "Practically every man or woman who triumphs against the odds is, on closer inspection, a beneficiary of unusual circumstances" (p. 9). However, history provides innumerable examples of brilliance, skilled aptitude, or giftedness of individuals who were not the beneficiary of privileged unusual circumstances but, rather, subjected to exclusion from power and privilege. For this content analysis, we employed a funds-of-knowledge approach to giftedness in addition to creative-productive giftedness. A funds-of-knowledge approach to analyzing the environmental factors of giftedness allows us to see the situated support of marginalized yet gifted individuals not as privileges but as diverse bases for knowledge (González et al., 2006). During the content analysis process, we specifically explored how the texts showed the diverse resources of knowledge present in the child's context that supported their giftedness.

### *Funds of Knowledge and Community Cultural Wealth*

As González et al. (2006) put it simply, the concept of funds of knowledge is based on the assumption that "people are competent and have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge" (pp. ix–x). These authors theorized funds of knowledge by interviewing and analyzing families about their daily lives, as daily activities "are a manifestation of particular historically accumulated funds of knowledge that households possess. Instead of individual representations of an essentialized group, household practices are viewed as dynamic, emergent, and interactional" (p. 41). Yosso (2005) furthered funds of knowledge through a critical-race-theory lens that identified various forms of capital students of color possess, although they are not always valued in educational settings. Taken together, these forms of capital represent community cultural wealth. In this content analysis, we employed a theory of knowledge that valued the funds of knowledge in the situated activities of families and communities and valued how those activities represented forms of capital that cultivated the extraordinary gifted behaviors of the central figures in the text.

### Positionality Statement

We identify as White females and recognize the privileges associated with our identities. This is an etic position compared to the historical figures of the texts we analyzed and the rural, Black, gifted learners whose education we make connections to in this article. In any research, an etic positionality bears important consideration; in qualitative research, it bears even more important consideration because of the researchers' role in constructing the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). We also align with an antiracist stance (Kendi, 2019) and believe in the power of equity literacy (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015) to transform schools and learning. We hope this added lens to our positions was enough to critically analyze the texts in ways that support equity and justice. Through these lenses and critical content analysis design, we explored

how rural Black gifted youth are represented in five contemporary nonfiction texts.

### Critical Content Analysis Design

Content analysis is both a methodological perspective and tool for analysis; it offers a way to gain qualitative insights into existing texts through close analysis (Krippendorff, 2018). Scholars may take content analysis a step further by bringing a critical lens to existing texts via critical content analysis (Short, 2016). In so doing, researchers acknowledge a twofold experience of power dynamics (Freire, 1970/2000) and potential transactions (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994) that readers may have with texts. Thus, critical content analysis assumes that the researcher has taken a critical stance prior to analyzing text, and all findings are grounded in theory that seeks to illustrate and eradicate oppression.

### Text Selection

To select the texts for this study, we relied on lists compiled by advocates for social education—Socialjusticebooks.org and the National Council for Social Studies Notable Trade Book List—within the last 15 years. Our search criteria were as follows: informational text, picture book, elementary level, Black protagonist, childhood experience, displays characteristics of giftedness, and at least a partial rural setting. We chose five texts that met these criteria (see Table 1). After selecting the texts, we elicited the assistance of a graduate student and collected information about the texts, authors, and illustrators. Like Gilton (2020), we value the role of illustrators and recognize the importance of who is creating the texts that feature Black children in positive ways (see Table 1). Notably, *Nina: Jazz Legend and Civil Rights Activist* (Brière-Haquet, 2017) has received no awards for either the author or the illustrator. Despite this, we believe this was a text worthy of analysis, and it features the only female protagonist of the selected texts.

### Data Analysis

This research was grounded in the axioms and implications of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Our data analysis was guided by the processes for critical content analysis outlined by Short (2016) and Bradford (2016) and our theoretical framework. In phase 1, we selected a research question grounded in existing research and our own observations about texts. Then, we selected texts based on the criteria described above. We conducted independent, first readings of the five texts from an aesthetic and descriptive exploratory stance (Saldaña, 2016), and we followed up our readings with an informal discussion of our thoughts and initial codes.

In phase 2, our analysis took a more deductive stance, and we reread the texts and looked for prominent features in each, to develop a more refined categorical coding structure (Saldaña, 2016). We collected this information into a semantic feature analysis table and discussed how the codes aligned with our research question and theoretical framework (see Table 2). At this time, we used our first set of codes, personal notes, and research question to create a coding frame. Independently, we each reread the texts and coded them using our agreed-upon codes.

In phase 3, we discussed our independent coding results by examining each code for all five texts until we reached 100% agreement. Throughout this process, we referred back to our theoretical frameworks to ensure we were maintaining a critical stance in our analysis. Finally, we independently created concept maps to show the relationship among our codes, refining where necessary. Then we compared our categories against our final coding frame to arrive at three critical themes and underlying subthemes as our findings.

**Table 1**

*Titles Selected for Analysis in This Study*

| Title | Summary | Sample of Awards | Additional Elements |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Before John Was a Jazz Giant: A Song of John Coltrane* (Weatherford, 2008) | Highlights the childhood of John Coltrane, a gifted jazz musician. Coltrane grew up in rural North Carolina, and this informational narrative shows all of the ways John learned to absorb music in the world around him. Lexile: AD1090 | • 2009, Coretta Scott King Award<br>• 2009, National Council for the Social Studies Notable Trade Books for Young People<br>• 2009, Golden Kite Award for Picture Book Text | Author's Note; Selected Listening; Further Reading |
| *Carter Reads the Newspaper* (Hopkinson, 2019) | Shows Carter G. Woodson's journey from being the child of enslaved people to the founder of Black History Month. Woodson was born in rural Virginia and spent his childhood enacting his propensity for advocacy. Lexile: 810 | • 2019, Eureka! Nonfiction Children's Book Award Silver Honor<br>• 2019, Parents' Choice Silver Honor Award<br>• 2020, Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People<br>• 2020, Notable Children's Books | Learn More Section; Bibliography; Author's Note; Illustrator's Note; List of Black Leaders; Timeline; References; supporting quotations |
| *The Secret Garden of George Washington Carver* (Barretta, 2020) | Explores the childhood of scientist and environmentalist George Washington Carver. Carver applies his giftedness to teach others about agriculture and advocates for reform along the way. Lexile: approximately 810 | • 2017, Carolyn W. Field Honor Book Award<br>• 2017, Children's Book Council Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People<br>• 2016, The New York Public Library Best Books for Kids | Timeline; Bibliography; Further Reading |
| *Nina: Jazz Legend and Civil Rights Activist* (Brière-Haquet, 2017) | This visually stunning text takes the reader through an important event in Nina Simone's childhood. Simone was a world-renowned musician and activist from rural North Carolina. Lexile: 560 | | |
| *Poet: The Remarkable Story of George Moses Horton* (Tate, 2015) | Shares the story of gifted writer George Moses Horton. Born into slavery in rural North Carolina, Horton taught himself to read and write and then monetized his skills, as well as using them to advocate for abolition. Lexile: 730 | • 2016, Ezra Jack Keats Book Author Award<br>• 2016, Christopher Award<br>• 2016, Texas Institute of Letters H-E-B/Jean Flynn Award for Best Children's Book | Author's Note; Bibliography; References; supporting quotations |

**Table 2**

*Semantic Feature Analysis From Phase 2*

| | Text | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Semantic Feature** | **Barretta, 2020** | **Brière-Haquet, 2017** | **Hopkinson, 2019** | **Tate, 2015** | **Weatherford, 2008** |
| Gifted | x | x | x | x | x |
| Black | x | x | x | x | x |
| Rural | x | x | x | x | x |
| North Carolina Connection | — | x | — | x | x |
| Race-based discrimination and oppression | x | x | x | x | — |
| Poverty | x | — | x | x | x |
| Church | — | x | — | x | x |
| Child supported community | x | x | x | x | x |
| Black community supported giftedness | x | x | x | x | x |

## Findings

While the texts varied in how they substantiated the historical claims they were making (see limitations section), we focused our analysis on the content as presented by the authors. We attribute internal and external dialogue to the historical figure in each given text and cited the author of the text. The three critical themes we identified were intersectionality, enacting giftedness, and reciprocal relationships with community.

### Intersectionality

Using Crenshaw's (1990) theory of intersectional oppressions, we identified a number of themes that illustrated the socially constructed barriers the historical figures faced in the texts, as well as relationships among them.

#### *Race-Based Discrimination in Learning*

Each of the historical figures experienced race-based discrimination in the selected texts, except John Coltrane (Weatherford, 2008). While racism pervaded the lives in the other texts, there were many specific similarities of how racism related to their opportunities to learn. George Washington Carver's story illustrated powerful examples of race-based discrimination related to education, both as a younger child, when he exclaimed, "I wish I could go to school with the white children" (Barretta, 2020, n.p.), and as a young adult in 1885 when, after being accepted to Highland College, the school refused to admit him when they learned he was African American. The scenes in *Poet: George Moses Horton* also illuminate the exclusion George Moses Horton must have felt to be restricted from educational opportunities because of his race, when it is explained that, "when white children studied their books, he lingered nearby. He listened as they repeated their letters of the alphabet" (Tate, 2015, n.p.). Despite circumventing these barriers to excel enough in language to become a published author, Horton was still unable to live his life freely when he reached adulthood. Into the twentieth century, the text about Carter G. Woodson reports that he was told by a professor at Harvard that "Black people had no history" (Hopkinson, 2019, n.p.). Nina Simone's opportunities to learn and perform music were impacted by racism through the narrowed types of music she learned and restrictions on her performances; it even affected how she saw the white and black keys on the piano: "Yes, that's the way it was. White was whole. Black was half. It was that way everywhere and for everyone." (Brière-Haquet, 2017, n.p.).

#### *Obstacles of Poverty*

In addition to race-based discrimination, obstacles and barriers experienced by the historical figures were compounded by poverty. While not all

texts analyzed in this study included examples of poverty, it was an important part of the life stories of several of the historical figures. In particular, poverty, or needing economic resources, was a key factor in the stories of those who had been enslaved. Food was in scarce supply, as Woodson noted that he and his siblings "would leave the table hungry to go to the woods to pluck the persimmons" (Hopkinson, 2019, n.p.). Clothing was also limited, and illustrations often depicted the protagonists wearing tattered outfits. In the case of Woodson, he would go to bed early on Saturday nights so his mother could wash his only set of clothes in preparation for church on Sunday (Hopkinson, 2019). When it was time for Nina Simone to perform her first concert, her mother made her dress instead of buying one, which suggests a scarcity of resources (Brière-Haquet, 2017). Lack of economic resources pushed Woodson and Carver into early adult-like work. To illustrate, as a teenager Woodson drove a garbage wagon instead of going to high school, and he even risked his life to work in coal mines (Hopkinson, 2019). Carver set out on his own at age 12 to look for more work opportunities (Barretta, 2020); he did not have the chance to pursue further education until later in his life.

## Enacting Giftedness

The historical figures represented in the analyzed texts cultivated their giftedness according to their unique area—music, science, literacy, and advocacy. However, their gifted behaviors shared common features. In particular, the young, Black, gifted children in these texts were largely curious, self-propelled, and resourceful in childhood and beyond.

### *Curious*

All five of the historical figures represented in the texts showed curiosity about the world around them in relation to their area of giftedness. Nina Simone questioned her teacher and wondered about the racial injustices that she saw in her community and her role as a Black, female pianist in the midst of an all-White, all-male musical canon (Brière-Haquet, 2017). George Washington Carver conducted his experiments in his outdoor garden as he "[wanted] to know the name of every stone and flower and insect and bird and beast" (Barretta, 2020, n.p.). He continued experimenting through his adult life as he documented over 300 ways to use peanuts and ran a research lab. George Moses Horton pretended to read by mimicking and watching those around him, which later turned into word play through poetry (Tate, 2015). Likewise, Carter G. Woodson's curiosity was fed by reading and he found his "interest in penetrating the people of [his] past was deepened" (Hopkinson, 2019, n.p.). John Coltrane "was all ears" as he developed his musical gifts at first from consuming the music of his home and community (Weatherford, 2008, n.p.).

### *Self-Propelled*

In each of the biographies, the children created some of their own opportunities for growth by making learning situations for themselves and developing their giftedness in these spaces. For example, Coltrane was always watching and listening; then eventually he "picked up that horn, blew into the mouthpiece . . . and breathed every sound he'd ever known into a bold new song" (Weatherford, 2008, n.p.). Horton taught himself to read in a similar way by listening to privileged, White children learn the alphabet; he used his emergent literacy knowledge to teach himself to read from a discarded spelling book (Tate, 2015). Carver struggled to master botany as a child, but "the more he experimented, the more he learned" (Barretta, 2020, n.p.). He continued to expose himself to science in nature, until he was able to not only understand it but also capture its nuances in his paintings. Woodson and Simone received some formal training, yet the authors still presented Woodson as enhancing his giftedness on his own as he sought out learning opportunities related to concepts like economics and politics (Hopkinson, 2019). Simone's self-directedness is portrayed in the illustrations, which always show her alone at the piano. The front cover shows a picture of an inquisitive Black female child with one finger on a black key, which suggests how on her own Simone used her talent for beauty and to raise awareness (Brière-Haquet, 2017).

### *Resourcefulness*

As children, these historical figures used the resources that were available in order to pursue

their interests, which in turn developed their giftedness. In some ways, the children's resourcefulness was organic as when Coltrane was listening to music every chance that he had (Weatherford, 2008). However, most examples of resourcefulness were driven by the children's economic hardships rooted in racial discrimination. The children were determined to learn, and whether they used books discarded by their White peers or read old, outdated newspapers, they found a way. Nothing was wasted. As noted in Carver's biography, he made needles from turkey feathers and dyes from nuts and berries, and used plants for medicine and paint (Barretta, 2020).

### Reciprocal Relationships with Community

All of the books illuminated the situated nature of each historical figure's giftedness. The most coherent theme related to this was the reciprocal relationship between the historical figure's giftedness and their community. In each of the texts, there were clear references to how the community supported the child and also how the child supported their community.

#### *Community Supported Gifts*

Findings included coded excerpts in all of the texts that identified representations of how the historical figure's giftedness developed within a context of community and familial support. In many instances, it was clear how the gifted behaviors were connected to the community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and the family's funds of knowledge (González et al., 2006).

**Family.** Even though George Moses Horton's mother could not read, she gave him her most valuable possession, her hymnal, as support for George's desire to learn how to access written language (Tate, 2015). Similarly in *Carter Reads the Newspaper*, even though Carter G. Woodson's father couldn't read, his value of being informed provoked an opportunity for Woodson to read the newspaper aloud to him. In addition, Woodson's father supported his son's ambition with his talents by teaching him "to look anyone in the eye and declare, I am your equal" (Hopkinson, 2019, n.p.).

**Church Place.** The church was also an important community support for the historical figures in the texts. In *Before John was a Jazz Legend*, the narrator relays all the sounds that Coltrane heard growing up, including hearing "Grandpa's Sunday sermons, Mama playing hymns for the senior choir" (Weatherford, 2008, n.p.). These were illustrated as important influences on a further page where a church building is pictured in the background of Coltrane playing his horn. In *Nina*, the church invited Simone to share her abilities in front of an audience, although the problematic events regarding seating, described below, ensued (Brière-Haquet, 2017).

**Broader Community.** In addition to family and church, broader community resources also supported the central figures' giftedness. Largely, the authors rightly focused on the capital of the Black community from which the children in the texts benefited. The Black community was largely present, even in the short simple texts of *Before John was a Jazz Giant*, for example, through a reference to the scoutmaster's call to join the band (Weatherford, 2008, n.p.). While George Washington Carver's (Barretta, 2020) broader community originally discouraged his pursuit of flowers, they later encouraged his inquiries by calling him the "Plant Doctor" when they would bring him their unhealthy plants for care. The text also shares how Carver was supported by various Black mentors after leaving his home at age 12 to pursue more education. Forced to work in the coal mines at a young age, Woodson even found support for his talents from a community of coal miners in Oliver Jones's house, where he had access to books written by African Americans. His abilities were engaged through the opportunity of informing others what was in the daily newspapers (Hopkinson, 2019). Horton was the only central figure of the texts who was additionally and substantially supported by a White community. Although first teasing Horton when he sold fruit and vegetables on campus, the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill community supported the newly famous poet by giving him books, supporting his poem business, and garnering influential support for his writing and quest for freedom (Tate, 2015).

### *Gifts Supported Community: For Others and the World Through Activism*

In both big and small ways, the central figures in the texts used their gifts for the benefit of others. In *Before John was a Jazz Giant*, Coltrane participated in a community band toward the enjoyment of others (Weatherford, 2008). Woodson's reading of the newspapers benefited his father and his fellow coal miners (Hopkinson, 2019), and Horton wrote poems for others, although he eventually benefited financially (Tate, 2015).

Using one's giftedness to take action against injustice or in support of the Black community was common among the biographies, and it was portrayed in both childhood and adulthood. For instance, Simone (Brière-Haquet, 2017) withheld her gift from a concert audience until her mother was returned to her rightful place in the front row. Woodson helped miners learn about their rights as a young adult. However, his best-known activism occurred in response to a college professor who told him "Black people had no history" (Hopkinson, 2019, n.p.). Woodson's answer was to work to show the world the powerful history of Black people via his creation of Negro History Week, the predecessor to Black History Month. Horton used his gifts as a writer to protest enslavement (Tate, 2015). Also, Carver's initial altruistic efforts to cure the plants of community members spurred a lifelong career in activism through educating and improving rural farming practices (Barretta, 2020).

## Limitations

Our findings are described using direct quotes, paraphrased text, and illustrations from the selected texts. The ways in which the authors of the texts substantiated their historical claims varied and could be observed from various included text features (see Table 1). Therefore, the internal and external dialogue in the selected children's literature may or may not be historically accurate; however, our purpose was to investigate how young, Black, gifted children were represented in text, not to verify the historical nuances. Additionally, we do not claim these are the only texts that present rural, Black, gifted historical figures during youth; however, these five met our criteria and served our research purpose of analyzing the intersectionality of historical rural Black gifted figures in contemporary nonfiction children's literature.

## Discussion

The purpose of this inquiry was to understand how gifted Black, rural youth are represented in selected contemporary nonfiction children's literature. Our findings revealed that the selected texts included substantial representations of enacted giftedness as well as contextual connections between the gifted individuals and their rural communities. These representations are important for a number of reasons.

First, because the focus of the content analysis was on Black figures, often in times when they were nearly completely excluded from traditional schooling, the texts trouble scholarly debunked yet popular notions of *schoolhouse giftedness*: giftedness identified only by traditional forms of identification, such as cognitive ability tests and other abilities valued in traditional school learning situations (Renzulli, 1999). None of the texts focused on the identification nor the cultivation of gifted abilities within school classrooms. Instead, the historical figures displayed productive-creative giftedness in the form of artistic expression and original thinking that was fueled by curiosity and self-driven inquiry. Instead of within the classroom, the enactments of giftedness took place in more community-based settings, where they had an authentic impact on others—another characteristic of creative-productive giftedness (Renzulli, 1999). Therefore, the texts offer a situated representation of giftedness in which community funds of knowledge (González et al., 2006) both affect and are affected by the gifted individual.

The findings of this content analysis also offer hope that counternarratives are available that resist the deficit views of Black and rural potential. While the text selection process revealed just how few mirrors of these intersectional identities there are among contemporary nonfiction titles, the books selected might offer important support for gifted Black, rural youth, who need to see themselves more in books. They also could be resources for teachers who need to see giftedness in more of their Black, rural students. In particular, the books might help teachers recognize the various forms of capital

(Yosso, 2005) their rural, gifted Black youth possess. For example, many of the books shared stories of aspirational capital—the ability to maintain hope for the future even in the face of barriers—as four of the fives texts included substantial context of the intersectional barriers the gifted individuals faced and the determination they had to keep performing and cultivating their gifts. Linguistic and resistant capital was also maximized in many of the figures' stories, such as George Moses Horton's gifts in poem writing and Nina Simone's actions to resist segregation during her recital.

In addition to highlighting underrepresented types of giftedness and underrepresented identities associated with giftedness, the findings also share connections to enrichment models and goals of enrichment models that have been advocated for in gifted education literature. Type III enrichment activities of the enrichment triad model (Renzulli & Reis, 1997) make students firsthand inquirers and "encourage them to practice problem solving, complex thinking and higher-order executive functioning tasks, while simultaneously exposing the students to a complex, changing and challenging world that gives rise to self-reflection on diversity, human concerns, altruism, and ethics" (Renzulli & D'Souza, 2014, p. 161). It is advocated that this type of enrichment might cultivate the propensity of gifted individuals to use their talents to improve the human condition. Working toward this goal has been sometimes titled Operation Houndstooth (Renzulli & D'Souza, 2014). Within the selected texts of this content analysis, four of the five gifted historical figures shared traits related to the service component of Operation Houndstooth and perhaps extend this enrichment to robust activism: Simone used her music to protest injustice, Woodson created Negro History Week (which later became Black History Month), George Carver educated others on healthy agricultural practices, and Horton used his writing to protest slavery.

Our findings offer an extension to the Enrichment Triad Model and Operation Houndstooth by illuminating the importance of the reciprocal role of the community in supporting the gifted individual. Yes, these gifted individuals worked to improve their various communities, but their gifts were also supported and cultivated by community cultural wealth—capital that even in nontraditional identification processes of giftedness is often undervalued. Taken together, the text set analyzed here shares evidence of all six of Yosso's types of cultural capital that are supported by communities of color: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant (Yosso, 2005). This is an important caveat to the often decontextualized identification processes and apolitical enrichment models that ignore the role of community cultural wealth and funds of knowledge in the cultivation of giftedness.

## Conclusion

Nearly 40 years ago, author and illustrator Celia Berridge pleaded with the literature and journalism world to take children's books more seriously. Berridge (1981) hoped to demonstrate "that it is possible to find a lot to say about a really good picture book" (p. 157). Since then, not only have picture books been taken more seriously in literature, but their power as a tool in education has also become a topic of multiple scholarly fields within education. Thanks to the work of Johnson et al. (2016) and a number of other critical content analysis methodologists and scholars, rigorous analysis of children's literature can serve a wide variety of educational inquiries. The present content analysis has integrated a critical, antiracist stance into the selection of resources for rural gifted education by highlighting funds-of-knowledge and community-cultural-wealth perspectives. It is our intention that rural, Black, gifted learners have more opportunities to see mirrors of themselves in books and that those mirrors include how their rural communities are assets to their giftedness rather than deficits. It is also our intention that the findings can help teachers utilize strategies with contemporary nonfiction children's literature to build on existing community cultural wealth as part of their antideficit approach to teaching rural, gifted Black students. We share the belief that "gifted education need not be limited to academic components, but can also include preparation for a life-long pursuit of the common good and ethical and responsible leadership" (Renzulli & D'Souza, 2014, p. 159). The historical figures represented in these texts are admirable examples of Black, rural youth using

giftedness to improve the human condition, including transforming barriers they faced in their own lives.

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**Children's Literature Analyzed**

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# Take Care When Cutting: Five Approaches to Disaggregating School Data as Rural and Remote

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Education research that omits or insufficiently defines geographic locale can impair policy formulation, enactment, and evaluation. Such impairments might be especially detrimental for communities in rural and/or remote areas, particularly when they pertain to gifted education programs that struggle to operate at large scale (e.g., Advanced Placement). To enhance researchers' precision when analyzing school-level data, we developed five statistical approaches to operationalize rurality and remoteness using the Urban-Centric codes from the National Center of Education Statistics. With national data, we found important variations across these statistical approaches in (a) percentage of schools identified as rural and/or remote, (b) effect sizes, and (c) characterizations of schools' relative disadvantage in the breadth of opportunity to learn Advanced Placement content that they provide. These findings challenge prevailing practices of classifying communities dichotomously as nonrural or rural. The authors demonstrate several ways to address policy makers' and practitioners' needs by incorporating geographic locale into analyses of school data, operationalizing geographic locale precisely in theoretically sound ways, and avoiding dichotomies that can obscure meaningful variation.

***Keywords*:** rural schools, remoteness, research methods, educational equity

Precise research on school-level characteristics can help inform policy and practice with essential, contextually specific insights. For example, identifying geographic locale—especially rurality and remoteness—can considerably enhance sampling, analyses, or claims of generalizability about school-centered research. Problematically, popular media continuously harden overstated stereotypes about a nonrural/rural divide (e.g., Zitner & Overberg, 2016). Many celebrated authors, most notably Vance (2016), promulgate the "hillbilly trope", lampooning and further marginalizing the communities, cultures, aspirations, and opportunities of people who live, by most geographic definitions, beyond the metro-normative margins (Peine & Schafft, 2018; Roberts & Green, 2013). Importantly, some scholars counter such ill-informed accounts of rural and/or remote places by eschewing monolithic depictions about places that too many policy makers dismiss as "fly-over country" (see Catte, 2018; Cramer, 2016; Wuthnow, 2019). Consequently, incomplete, deficit-based narratives seep into the work of many researchers and state-level policy makers, who are often "not tuned into rural America" (Jordan & Hawley 2019, para. 3). Fittingly, Johnson (2017) depicts rural America as "deceptively simple" (para. 2).

Presidential polling data illustrate the importance of knowing what "rural" entails. Purportedly, Donald Trump's popularity varies considerably among respondents from urban, suburban, and rural places (Rakich & Mehta, 2018). We often endorse such claims as truth, neglecting to ask how urban, suburban, and rural are defined. Accordingly, a large-scale review of education research found 91.3% of articles that invoked rurality offered no way for readers to know how rural was being defined (Thier & Beach, 2019). Without precisely operationalizing geographic locale, how can scholars legitimize a study's context as internally valid, attribute effects about place to its observations, or stipulate limits on its external validity? How useful would research be to consumers without first addressing those core issues?

Although rurality has long been a "stepchild" to other education research pursuits (DeYoung, 1987, p. 140), geographic locale holds all the predictive promise of industry-standard contextual variables, such as race/ethnicity and socioeconomics (Kettler et al., 2015). For example, many studies of opportunity to learn advanced curricula, or high school students' access to college coursework, such as Advanced Placement (AP), negatively associate this equity-focused construct with rurality and/or remoteness (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016; Kettler et al., 2016; Mann et al., 2017). Deficit thinking and overgeneralization limit understanding of programs for gifted students in rural and/or remote places, undermining research that aims for precise examinations of how demographic variables operate within rural and/or remote contexts (Azano et al., 2017).

Unfortunately, studies of U.S. K-12 schools often insufficiently define what is rural, remote, both, or neither (Arnold et al., 2005; Coladarci, 2007). Few studies account for geographic locale (about 1 in 7), with far fewer addressing rurality (1 in 33) or remoteness (1 in 500; Thier & Beach, 2019). Second-class status for geographic locale, especially about rurality-remoteness, is curious in a country where more than 1 in 4 public schools exist in areas the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) identifies as rural (Showalter et al., 2019). Misunderstanding the policy context by failing to precisely define what is rural and/or remote could impede service of rural-specific needs regarding gifted education, just as can failing to develop rural-specific pedagogies to serve gifted students (Lawrence, 2009).

Thus, we designed this study to answer calls for research that better taps into rurality and remoteness (Corbett, 2018; Greenough & Nelson, 2015; Kettler et al., 2016; Koziol et al., 2015; Puryear & Kettler, 2017). Exemplifying possibilities arising from one of many ways to operationalize rurality and remoteness—NCES's Urban-Centric codes—we have employed an outcome variable of wide-ranging importance for equity-focused gifted education policy: breadth of opportunity to learn AP content (specifically the number of AP courses that a school received College Board authorization to offer). We offer five rival approaches for grouping schools by geographic locale, enabling researchers to better contextualize school settings. Comparing results from our five approaches, we found vital differences in how researchers produce and how consumers might interpret (a) percentages of schools identified as rural and/or remote, (b) effect sizes, and (c) schools' relative advantages or disadvantages. Ultimately, we show how more precise operationalization of schools' geographic characteristics can enhance initial understanding about overlapping and separable aspects of rurality and remoteness among researchers and policy makers. We also offer strategies to extend that initial understanding through in-depth analyses that account for local nuances, which coding schemata cannot detect.

## Toward Definitional Clarity

Consensus definitions still confound research of place in the United States, where the federal government has recently used more than 20 classification schemata to parse rural areas from other locales (Arnold et al., 2007; Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008). However, those schemata serve agency missions as diverse as those of the Census Bureau, Department of Agriculture, and Office of Management and Budget. Definitions undergirding those schemata vary from residualizing rural areas as "whatever is not urban" (U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration, 2018, p. 3) to the 12

Urban-Centric codes that NCES has based upon both population and urban proximity (see Table 1). Definitional disagreement is a reason that rural and/or remote schools occupy disproportionately less than their share of the education research landscape (Coladarci, 2007; Thier & Beach, 2019).

**Table 1**

*Metro-Centric Codes and Urban-Centric Codes (see Geverdt, 2015)*

| Locale Category | Metro-Centric Codes | | Urban-Centric Codes | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Subcategory** | **Descriptor** | **Subcategory** | **Descriptor** |
| City | Large (1) | City/metro area, pop. ≥ 250,000 | Large (11) | Inside urbanized area and principal city, pop. ≥ 250,000 |
| | Midsize (2) | City/metro area, pop. < 250,000 | Midsize (12) | Inside urbanized area and principal city, 100,000 ≤ pop. < 250,000 |
| | | | Small (13) | Inside urbanized area and principal city, pop. < 100,000 |
| Urban fringe/ suburb | Large (3) | Within large city/metro area, urban by Census | Suburb, large (21) | Outside principal city, inside urbanized area, pop. ≥ 250,000 |
| | Midsize (4) | Within midsize city/metro area, urban by Census | Suburb, midsize (22) | Outside principal city, inside urbanized area, 100,000 ≤ pop. < 250,000 |
| | | | Suburb, small (23) | Outside principal city, inside urbanized area, pop. < 100,000 |
| Town | Large (5) | Incorporated place, pop. ≥ 25,000, outside city/metro area | Fringe (31) | Inside urban cluster, ≤ 10 miles from urbanized area |
| | Small (6) | Incorporated place, 2,500 < pop. < 25,000, outside city/metro area | Distant (32) | Inside urban cluster, > 10 miles but ≤ 35 miles from urbanized area |
| | | | Remote (33) | Inside urban cluster, > 35 miles from urbanized area |
| Rural | Outside metro area (7) | Rural by Census, outside large/midsize city/metro area | Fringe (41) | Rural by Census ≤ 5 miles from urbanized area, ≤ 2.50 miles from urban cluster |
| | Inside metro area (8) | Rural by Census, inside large/midsize city/metro area | Distant (42) | Rural by Census > 5 miles but ≤ 25 miles from urbanized area, > 2.50 but ≤ 10 miles from urban cluster |
| | | | Remote (43) | Rural by Census > 25 miles from urbanized area, > 10 miles from urban cluster |

To further address a definitional clarity gap that limits education research, we have added to recent scholarship about variation within geographical locale operationalizations. For example, analyzing science scores from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998–99, Koziol et al. (2015) showed how parameter estimates differed among (a) the NCES's Metro-Centric codes, the precursor of the Urban-Centric codes; (b) Office of Management and Budget core-based statistical areas; and (c) U.S. Census Bureau classifications to measure geographic locale. Koziol et al. would have preferred to employ the Urban-Centric codes, but the newer iteration debuted seven years beyond their study's data range. Simplifying analyses, Koziol et al. dichotomized schools as urban or rural per the coding schema. In contrast, here we designed our study to examine how dichotomies might limit geographic locale understandings.

Using the Urban-Centric codes, multiple research teams have observed subcategorical differences within their designations of city, suburb, town, and rural for schools (Greenough & Nelson, 2015) and districts (Puryear & Kettler, 2017). Examining schools' enrollment counts and Title I eligibility rates based on the 2010–2011 Common Core of Data from the U.S. Department of Education, Greenough and Nelson (2015) stressed differences within the rural category, where 61.6% of students in rural schools truly attended rural-fringe schools (coded 41). They distinguished this rural majority from students in rural-distant (coded 42, accounting for 28.7%) or rural-remote (coded 43, accounting for 9.6%) schools. They also reported rural-fringe schools' higher enrollments and lower rates of Title I eligibility and free or reduced-price meals than averages both nationally and among rural-distant and rural-remote schools. Seemingly, rural-fringe schools resembled peers in large suburbs, while challenges in rural-distant and rural-remote schools resembled many challenges found within schools in large cities. Accordingly, Greenough and Nelson nominated the Urban-Centric codes to become education researchers' standard geographic locale definition. By contrast, Puryear and Kettler (2017) questioned the Urban-Centric codes' utility for anything other than census purposes after their district-level analysis of gifted education opportunities revealed similar findings: rural-fringe districts resembled urban, suburban, and town districts more so than rural-distant and rural-remote districts. They also called for more research on the Urban-Centric codes to examine associations between opportunities and urban proximity.

In an earlier examination of district data, Kettler et al. (2016) also raised concern about an unqualified embrace of the NCES's schema. They argued that simultaneous emphasis of the Urban-Centric codes on community-level population and urban proximity ignores a potentially relevant confound: student enrollment. So, they dichotomized Texas school districts as rural or not and then filtered schools within districts by student enrollment data. One aim of the present study was to examine the extent to which dichotomizing NCES-coded data (e.g., Kettler et al., 2016; Koziol et al., 2015) restricts the predictive value of the four Urban-Centric categories and 12 subcategories. Kettler et al. (2016) joined Greenough and Nelson (2015) in recognizing that a proximity emphasis better accounts for the rise of exurbs that sit between cities and formerly rural spaces rather than parsing enrollment counts. Similarly, both scholarly groups linked rurality and remoteness. Perhaps Kettler et al. overcorrected for school size, which in their approach supersedes other aspects of rurality. They developed their approach from six qualitative characteristics co-developed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Rural School and Community Trust. As an outcome of that collaboration, proximity from urban areas is the primary characteristic that undergirds rural education with school size ranking fourth. We recognize proximity as an essential consideration when approaching geographic locale overall (Puryear & Kettler, 2017), especially for attempting to disentangle rurality from remoteness. We share an understanding that modern-day "rural schools are not necessarily small or remote" (Kettler et al., 2016, p. 248). Meanwhile, an overreliance on broad categorical boundaries can hinder consensus-building efforts among researchers who focus on rural and/or remote places, ultimately thwarting policy and practice (Biddle et al., 2019).

### Geographic Precision

Normalizing imprecise geographic locale descriptions undermines researchers' attempts to capture what rurality and/or remoteness mean for school communities and inhibits equity of gifted education opportunities within communities that are geographically marginalized (Howley, 2009; Puryear & Kettler, 2017; Rasheed, 2020). Research often vaguely delineates suburbs, towns, and rural areas (Scribner, 2015). Problematically, in alignment with the NCES Urban-Centric codes, a large suburb, such as Duquesne, Pennsylvania, can be designated "rural" in a study lacking careful operationalization (Carlson et al., 2011). Such distinctions without difference deprive studies of important descriptive contours. In lieu of precise definitions for rural and/or remote places, the field will continue to lack necessary comparisons within and between rural areas (Ali & Saunders, 2006).

Regarding rural and/or remote areas, Burnell (2003) highlighted geographic isolation as a core facet of rural life. Still, researchers who invoke the Urban-Centric codes commonly cluster the three rural subcategories to pit them against all others and ignore fringe-suburb overlaps rather than isolate any possible effects of remoteness (e.g., Glover et al., 2016). Studies that employ the Urban-Centric codes rarely separate fringe from distant and/or remote distinctions in town or rural spaces, with Puryear and Kettler (2017) as a notable exception. Some studies have used the subcategories to sample exclusively in town and/or rural contexts (e.g., Irvin et al., 2011; Petrin et al., 2014), but the field can still benefit from studies that maximize the utility of the Urban-Centric codes to extricate rurality and remoteness as predictors or covariates.

### Research Question and Hypothesis

An innovative accounting of the concentric nature of urban proximity in Taiwan (Chen et al., 2017) inspired us to provide U.S. education researchers with more precise approaches to study school contexts as rural and/or remote. Thus, we asked: Do different approaches to NCES' Urban-Centric codes yield disparate interpretations of rurality and/or remoteness for school data? We found in Chen et al. (2017) the most precise education-focused approach to marshal publicly available data in a way that can disrupt the default dependence on a nonrural/rural dichotomy. Sharing their recognition of suburbs encircling cities concentrically, and then towns and rural areas forming fringe, distant, and remote rings, we hypothesized proximity-based variations for our five approaches to geographic locale. To test that hypothesis, we inspected three outcomes: (a) percentages of schools that could be counted as rural and/or remote, (b) effect sizes, and (c) how locale groups should be labeled as relatively advantaged or disadvantaged in terms of the breadth of opportunity to learn AP content that schools provide.

## Method

We tested our hypothesis through group mean statistical comparisons. In this section we first detail data sources for these group mean statistical comparisons and explain our choices of the Urban-Centric codes as a definitional schema to examine our outcome variable: breadth of opportunity to learn AP content. Next, we describe our creation of five approaches to defining geographical locale, emphasizing our innovative tactics to account for rurality and remoteness. Then, we describe our analytical procedures.

### Data Sources

The Urban-Centric codes can facilitate defensible decisions for analyzing school data based on place (Greenough & Nelson, 2015). Our applications of the Urban-Centric codes recognized rurality as a facet of community identity (Schafft & Jackson, 2010) and reflect a desire to interrupt nonrural/rural and center/periphery dichotomies that blur rural-remote distinctions, shrouding rural and remote places in deficit-based language (Azano et al., 2017, 2019; Kettler et al., 2016; Shils, 1961). Instead, we have treated "remote" as a function of proximity from urban spaces. Thus, our approaches operationalize geographic locale according to classifications that incur the benefits and acknowledge the limitations of quantitative research (Koziol et al., 2015).

Our study endorses upgrades from the Metro-Centric codes, which NCES created in 1980 and remain in use despite the greater partnership with

the U.S. Census Bureau and Office of Management and Budget that produced the Urban-Centric codes in 2006. Reflecting better data (e.g., global information systems affording more efficient address identification), the Urban-Centric codes now classify all K-12 schools (public and private) into one of four designations, city, suburb, town, and rural, each with one of two types of three-level subcategories (see Table 1). Cities and suburbs are subcategorized by size. Schools in all three city types and in large suburbs exist within both urbanized areas and principal cities. Midsize and small suburbs exist outside principal cities but inside urbanized areas. By contrast, towns and rural areas are subcategorized by proximity—fringe, distant, or remote—from urban clusters (U.S. Census-defined as 2,500 < residents < 50,000 residents) or urbanized areas (U.S. Census-defined as > 50,000 residents). Towns exist within urban clusters but outside of urbanized areas. Rural areas exist outside of both urbanized areas and urban clusters.

Our outcome variable, the number of AP courses that a school received College Board authorization to offer (i.e., breadth of opportunity to learn AP content), comes from the AP Course Audit (APCA) data set.[1] The APCA enables comprehensive examination of U.S. public high schools that have offered at least one AP course, a measure typically used in studies of geography-based opportunities to learn advanced curricula (e.g., Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016; Kettler et al., 2016; Malkus, 2016; Mann et al., 2017). In our study, breadth of opportunity to learn AP content is a proxy for gifted education that affords an important benefit beyond the typical approach of dichotomizing schools as having offered at least one AP course or not: our count-based outcome provides greater construct validity than dichotomizing opportunity among schools with zero AP offerings and schools with anywhere from 1 to 33 offerings.

Our count came from the APCA data for the 2012–2013 academic year, which features records for *N* = 14,200 U.S. public high schools, including 1,849 that offered no AP courses for that academic year (13.0%) but might have offered AP subsequently. In this instance, our choice of outcome variable benefited from naturally excluding high schools that had not offered AP coursework at the point of data collection. Extending the APCA data set to high schools that had not yet adopted AP, but would in future years, would artificially skew the data, overinflating estimates based on a large percentage of non-occurrences. Substantively, including such schools would invite a host of unknown reasons for why schools had not offered AP coursework by the point of data collection. Instead, we examined variance only among schools that offered AP coursework at least once to that point, affording comparisons of opportunities that schools truly, not theoretically, offered their students. Accordingly, we matched APCA cases to those schools' Urban-Centric codes in the publicly available Common Core of Data for 2012–2013 due to the convenience of that data year for both sets. After cleaning data and ensuring comparability, our analytical sample was *n* = 12,943 high schools. Our outcome offered suitable range: 0–33 AP courses available, in a year when the College Board offered 35 courses (apparently no school offered all 35 in that academic year). On average, schools offered 8.18 courses (*SD* = 6.89) with minimal skew (0.78).

**Generating Approaches**

First, we reviewed the limited number of studies with a methodological description detailing application of the Urban-Centric codes (Thier & Beach, 2019). Second, we examined those studies' assumptions in defining geographic locale, specifically as they pertained to rurality and/or remoteness. Third, we surmised that five permutations would generate meaningful differences with our outcome of interest. Our decisions produced two different dichotomies and three polytomous approaches comprising 4, 5, or 12 levels. Below we describe each approach, providing a descriptive title, itemizing which Urban-Centric codes fit into each group, detailing how we derived

[1] At the time of writing, the first two authors were employed at Inflexion, an educational nonprofit that holds the APCA data in coordination with the College Board.

the approach, and citing studies that employ each approach where applicable.

### *Dichotomous Approaches*

Approximating colloquial notions of the nonrural/rural divide, the *blunt dichotomy* represents the roughest geographic cut of school data. Using this approach, Jacob et al. (2015) studied school leadership such that all schools in cities (Urban-Centric codes 11, 12, 13) and suburbs (21, 22, 23), regardless of size, were identified as "nonrural." By contrast, town (31, 32, 33) and rural (41, 42, 43) schools, regardless of urban proximity, were identified as "rural," evoking sharp divides that an unsophisticated observer might use to distinguish "city slickers" and inhabitants of "wide-open spaces." Critics might object to the blunt dichotomy's neglect of rural complexities: it cannot detect unique features that towns demonstrate or even conceive of remoteness as a salient characteristic of rural life.

We constructed a rival dichotomy to examine more contemporary views of a nonrural/rural divide. Informed by Greenough and Nelson (2015), the *postsprawl dichotomy* categorizes as "nonrural" all schools in cities (Urban-Centric codes 11, 12, 13) and suburbs (21, 22, 23), regardless of size, plus fringes of towns (31) and rural areas (41). In this approach, "rural" comprises four subcategories, two distant (32 for towns, 42 for rural) and two remote (33 for towns, 43 for rural), accounting for the ongoing absorption of communities at the fringes of rapidly expanding cities. We intended this approach to explore potentially meaningful distinctions within the rural category and to retain the ability to differentiate what many research consumers characterize informally as nonrural versus rural.

### *Polytomous Approaches*

The approach we call *superimposed quartiles* (Urban-Centric codes: city = 11–13, suburb = 21–23, town = 31–33, rural = 41–43) have been used to depict "rural" disadvantages in AP access—viewed dichotomously—compared to peers in cities, suburbs, or towns (Malkus, 2016; Provasnik et al., 2007). Using the superimposed quartiles, Thier (2015) reported students in rural schools faced longer odds of accessing International Baccalaureate programs than peers in cities. Some analysts find the quartiles approach appealing for capitalizing on seemingly intact groups, examining intuitive differences between a small range of locales. However, we refer to these quartiles as superimposed because they do not capture within-category variation, contrary to findings from Greenough and Nelson (2015), who suggested that failing to account for within-category variation can raise as many questions as the superimposed-quartiles approach might answer. The superimposed quartiles parse neither size-related differences for cities or suburbs nor proximity differences for towns or rural areas, the latter making them insensitive to remoteness.

Perhaps more faithfully reflecting intersections of rurality and remoteness, some researchers have begun to employ a *proximity* approach when studying AP breadth (Roberts et al., 2020; Thier et al., 2016) and International Baccalaureate access (Thier & Beach, 2020). Studies sampling only in towns and rural areas have begun to account for remoteness either by distinguishing participants based on fringe, distant, and remote proximity to cities (Irvin et al., 2011) or by excluding cities, suburbs, and fringes (Petrin et al., 2014). A proximity approach assumes concentric rings around cities, increasingly differentiating peripheral levels from urban centers, a model dating to Burgess (1925) but still "the dominant form of class segregation" (Wei & Knox, 2015, p. 52). Keeping city and suburb groups intact, our proximity approach adds three groups to encapsulate fringe (i.e., towns coded 31 or rural areas coded 41), distant (32 and 42, respectively town and rural), and remote settings (33 and 43, respectively town and rural), enabling detection of linear geographic changes in students' opportunity to learn as proximity from urban areas increases. To examine gifted education opportunities, Puryear and Kettler (2017) applied a version of this approach to district-level data in one state, but only for the rural codes (i.e., 41, 42, and 43), not accounting for proximity among town-designated schools.

Although a proximity approach adds nuance, particularly around the developing phenomenon of exurbs, it cannot account for subcategories among cities and suburbs (community sizes) versus

subcategories among towns and rural areas (urban proximities). Therefore, our *fully nuanced* approach facilitates simultaneous inquiry about community size and urban proximity, examining 12 groups, each one an Urban-Centric code. We found no prior study that employs this approach, despite it representing the fullest articulation of the Urban-Centric codes. Perhaps the fully nuanced approach introduces greater complexity than is desirable for some analyses or with some data sets.

### Analyses

To test the null hypothesis that application of an operational definition of locale does not matter, we compared our five approaches to defining geographic locale with the Urban-Centric codes using the number of AP courses that a school received College Board authorization to offer in the 2012–2013 school year. We assessed dichotomous approaches with independent-sample *t*-tests and polytomous approaches with one-factor, between-subjects analyses of variance (Keppel & Wickens, 2004). To guard against our robust sample size influencing tests for the first four approaches, we set α = .001 with 99.9% confidence intervals. For our 12-level approach, we set α = .05 with a 95% confidence interval to account for an unbalanced design: 8 of 12 cells held fewer than 1,000 schools, and 3 of 12 held fewer than 500, but some exceeded 3,000. We used the Bonferroni procedure to control for familywise Type I error in post hoc comparisons and interpreted effect sizes as $\eta^2$ (Miles & Shevlin, 2001).

## Results

As expected, our five approaches to the Urban-Centric codes varied appreciably in percentages of schools classified as rural, in effect sizes, and in the number of AP courses that schools received College Board authorization to offer. In Table 2, we report percentages of schools counted as rural and/or remote; means, standard deviations, and confidence intervals; and effect sizes for both dichotomous approaches and our 4-level and 5-level polytomous approaches. In Table 3, we report corresponding information for the 12-level approach. In Table 4, we have summarized schools' geographic locale-associated degrees of disadvantage, based on our five approaches.

Using the *blunt dichotomy* approach, juxtaposing city and suburb (nonrural) schools against town and rural schools (both indicating rurality), nonrural schools accounted for a narrow majority. Schools in cities and suburbs offered 6.35 more AP courses on average ($M$ = 11.23, $SD$ = 7.14) than schools in towns and rural areas, $t(12{,}941) = 58.94$, $p < .001$, 99.9% CI [10.94, 11.52], with a large effect ($\eta^2 = 0.21$).

The *postsprawl dichotomy* approach added town-fringe and rural-fringe schools to cities and suburbs, forming the nonrural group. The rural percentage shrank considerably, and the course-offering margin of difference grew slightly. For this more intentionally defined dichotomous approach, reliant on some degree of theory about how rurality operates, the nonrural group included nearly 70% of schools and offered 6.70 more AP courses on average ($M$ = 10.23, $SD$ = 7.00) than its rural counterpart, $t(12{,}941) = 57.03$, $p < .001$, 99.9% CI [9.99, 10.47]. Still large, the effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.20$) was negligibly smaller than that with the blunt dichotomy approach.

Using the *superimposed quartiles* approach, locale percentages of schools evened out noticeably. Rural schools formed a plurality at 32.4%, towns accounted for 15.6%, and suburbs 29.4% of schools. Suburban schools ($M$ = 12.33, $SD$ = 6.81) offered 7.70 more AP courses than rural schools on average, holding a pronounced advantage in AP course offering over other groups, $F(3, 12{,}939) = 1{,}290.83$, $p < .001$, 99.9% CI [11.97, 12.69]. Cities ($M$ = 9.79, $SD$ = 7.30) accounted for 22.6% of schools and held advantages over schools in towns (4.39 more AP offerings on average) and rural areas (5.16). The effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.23$) was larger than for either of the dichotomous approaches.

**Table 2**

*Four Approaches to Parsing Geographic Locale in Examining Advanced Placement Course-Offering Data*

| Group | Urban-Centric Codes | *N* | Percentage | *M* | *SD* | 99.9% CI |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Blunt dichotomous approach ($\eta^2$ = 0.21) | | | | | | |
| Nonrural | 11, 12, 13, 21, 22, 23 | 6,733 | 52.02 | 11.23 | 7.14 | 10.94, 11.52 |
| Rural | 31, 32, 33, 41, 42, 43 | 6,210 | 47.98 | 4.88 | 4.78 | 4.68, 5.08 |
| Postsprawl approach ($\eta^2$ = 0.20) | | | | | | |
| Nonrural | 11, 12, 13, 21, 22, 23, 31, 41 | 8,981 | 69.38 | 10.23 | 7.00 | 9.99, 10.47 |
| Rural | 32, 33, 42, 43 | 3,962 | 30.61 | 3.53 | 9.79 | 3.02, 4.04 |
| Superimposed quartiles ($\eta^2$ = 0.23) | | | | | | |
| City | 11, 12, 13 | 2,927 | 22.61 | 9.79 | 7.30 | 9.34, 10.24 |
| Suburb | 21, 22, 23 | 3,806 | 29.41 | 12.33 | 6.81 | 11.97,12.69 |
| Town | 31, 32, 33 | 2,019 | 15.60 | 5.40 | 4.33 | 5.08, 5.72 |
| Rural | 41, 42, 43 | 4,191 | 32.38 | 4.63 | 4.97 | 4.38, 4.88 |
| Proximity approach ($\eta^2$ = 0.26) | | | | | | |
| City | 11, 12, 13 | 2,927 | 22.61 | 9.79 | 7.30 | 9.34, 10.24 |
| Suburb | 21, 22, 23 | 3,806 | 29.41 | 12.33 | 6.81 | 11.97, 12.69 |
| Fringe | 31, 41 | 2,248 | 17.37 | 7.26 | 5.61 | 6.87, 7.65 |
| Distant | 32, 42 | 2,563 | 19.80 | 3.79[a] | 3.68 | 3.55, 4.03 |
| Remote | 33, 43 | 1,399 | 10.81 | 3.05[a] | 3.40 | 2.75, 3.35 |
| **Overall** | | **12,943** | | **8.18** | **6.89** | **7.98, 8.38** |

*Note*: Rounding might prevent percentages from equaling 100%.

[a] Means were not significantly different during pairwise comparisons ($p$ > .001).

**Table 3**

*Fully Nuanced Approach to Parsing Geographic Locale in Examining Advanced Placement Course-Offering Data ($\eta^2$ = 0.30)*

| Urban-Centric Code | *n* | Percentage | *M** | *SD* | *95% CI* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 11—City: large | 1,591 | 12.29 | 8.40[a] | 7.25 | 8.04, 8.76 |
| 12—City: midsize | 615 | 4.75 | 11.24[bc] | 7.26 | 10.67, 11.81 |
| 13—City: small | 721 | 5.57 | 11.62[b] | 6.80 | 11.12, 12.12 |
| 21—Suburb: large | 3,161 | 24.42 | 12.93 | 6.82 | 12.69, 13.17 |
| 22—Suburb: midsize | 402 | 3.11 | 10.28[c] | 5.95 | 9.70, 10.86 |
| 23—Suburb: small | 243 | 1.88 | 8.02[ade] | 5.72 | 7.30, 8.74 |
| 31—Town: fringe | 479 | 3.70 | 6.56[dfg] | 4.61 | 6.15, 6.97 |
| 32—Town: distant | 912 | 7.05 | 5.35[fh] | 4.26 | 5.07, 5.63 |
| 33—Town: remote | 628 | 4.85 | 4.60[h] | 4.00 | 4.29, 4.91 |
| 41—Rural: fringe | 1,769 | 13.67 | 7.45[eg] | 5.83 | 7.18, 7.72 |
| 42—Rural: distant | 1,651 | 12.76 | 2.94 | 2.98 | 2.80, 3.08 |
| 43—Rural: remote | 771 | 5.96 | 1.79 | 2.10 | 1.64, 1.94 |
| **Overall** | **12,943** | | **8.18** | **6.89** | **8.06, 8.30** |

*Note*: Rounding might prevent percentages from equaling 100%.

*Same superscripts indicate means were not significantly different during pairwise comparisons ($p$ > .05).

The *proximity* approach featured fringe, distant, and remote groups regardless of town or rural status, as well as the superimposed quartile's city and suburb configurations. This five-group approach produced significant differences in AP courses offered, $F(4, 12{,}938) = 1{,}149.60$, $p < .001$, with the largest effect thus far ($\eta^2 = 0.26$). All pairwise comparisons showed significant differences in courses offered except between distant and remote schools. When examined as intact groups with the other three approaches, towns and rural schools diverged widely from city or suburban schools. With the proximity approach, differences from city or suburban schools were far less pronounced for fringe schools than for distant or remote peer institutions. Fringe schools ($M = 7.26$, $SD = 5.61$) offered 5.07 fewer AP courses than suburban schools and 2.53 fewer than city schools; distant schools ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 3.68$) offered 8.54 and 6.00 fewer, and remote schools ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 3.40$) 9.28 and 6.74 fewer, respectively. Distinguishing the proximity approach from the three previous approaches, distant and remote schools each averaged less than half the number of AP courses of fringe schools, stressing the importance of disentangling rurality from remoteness.

As expected, the *fully nuanced* approach revealed the widest variation (see Table 3) in percentages and mean differences in AP courses offered, $F(11, 12{,}931) = 493.42$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.30$. This 12-group approach allowed for 66 possible pairwise comparisons, 58 of which showed statistically significant differences (87.9%). For example, schools in large suburbs (Urban-Centric code 21) offered an average of 12.93 AP courses ($SD = 6.82$); thus, students in large suburbs could access 11.14 more AP courses than peers in rural-remote areas. Within-category comparisons also showed important differences. Schools in large cities ($M = 8.40$, $SD = 7.25$) offered significantly more courses on average than peer institutions in small and midsize cities, $p < .001$. Within suburbs, relations between course offering and suburb size were significant and negative. In town and rural settings, lower proximity to urban areas was associated with fewer course offerings. That decline was steeper in rural areas than in towns, suggesting more profound remoteness effects in rural spaces than in towns. Among towns, AP offerings dropped from fringe ($M = 6.56$, $SD = 4.61$) to distant ($M = 5.35$, $SD = 4.26$) to remote schools ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 4.00$). However, the distant-remote differential was not statistically significant, $p > .05$. In rural settings, schools at the fringe ($M = 7.45$, $SD = 5.83$) neared the national average ($M = 8.18$, $SD = 6.89$). By contrast, distant ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 2.98$) and remote schools in rural areas ($M = 1.79$, $SD = 2.10$) had the lowest means of any group across the five approaches.

Interpretations of the relative degrees of disadvantage that schools provided their students varied widely across approaches (see Table 4). In the *blunt dichotomy* approach, "rural" schools represented a slight minority, with a modest gap in AP courses offered (6.35) compared to nonrural schools. In the *postsprawl dichotomy* approach, the nonrural-rural gap stayed roughly the same (6.70 courses), but the percentage of rural schools shrank from about half to below a third. When applying the *superimposed quartiles* approach, the percentage of rural schools crept up, the leading locale shifted from an amorphous nonrural to a comparatively well-defined suburb, and rural disadvantage increased to 7.70 courses. Removing the blunt nonrural bin—often a misleading label intended as an urban synonym—made towns visible, showing disadvantage relative to peer institutions in suburbs and cities (6.93 and 4.39 courses, respectively), but less so than for rural schools.

Analytical scope and severity of disadvantage became increasingly clear with the *proximity* and *fully nuanced* approaches. The proximity approach raised awareness of percentages of schools distant from cities (19.8%) or in remote areas (10.8%). The suburbs group stood out as the largest (29.4% of all schools) and most advantaged (8.54 > than fringe and 9.28 > remote). Students in distant and remote schools had less access compared to students in schools at the fringes of towns or rural areas. Often swept coarsely into rural designations, fringes accounted for 17.4% of schools and offered significantly more AP courses than distant (by 3.47)

**Table 4**

*Interpretation of Rural-Remote Disadvantage: Percentage, Effect Size, and Gap From Lead*

| Approach | Rural-Remote Codes | Percentage | $\eta^2$ | Disadvantaged Group | Gap From Lead Group(s) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Blunt | 31, 32, 33, 41, 42, 43 | 47.98 | .21 | Rural<br>*M* = 4.88<br>*SD* = 4.78 | 6.35 APs < nonrural |
| Postsprawl | 32, 33,42, 43 | 30.61 | .20 | Rural<br>*M* = 3.53<br>*SD* = 3.60 | 6.70 APs < nonrural |
| Superimposed quartiles | 41, 42, 43 | 32.38 | .23 | Rural<br>*M* = 4.63<br>*SD* = 4.97 | 7.70 APs < suburbs |
| Proximity | 32, 42 | 19.80 | .26 | Distant<br>*M* = 3.79<br>*SD* = 3.68 | 8.54 APs < suburbs, 3.47 < fringe |
| | 33, 43 | 10.81 | | Remote<br>*M* = 3.05<br>*SD* = 3.40 | 9.28 APs < suburbs, 4.21 < fringe |
| Fully nuanced | 42 | 12.76 | .30 | Rural: distant<br>*M* = 2.94<br>*SD* = 2.98 | 9.99 APs < suburb-large, 4.51 < rural-fringe |
| | 43 | 5.96 | | Rural: remote<br>*M* = 1.79<br>*SD* = 2.10 | 11.14 APs < suburb-large, 5.66 < rural-fringe |

*Note*. APs = Advanced Placement courses.

or remote (4.21) peer schools. The 12-group *fully nuanced approach* created a rural-remote bin with less than 6% of schools but in which students had extremely limited access: two or fewer AP courses on average overall or 11.14 fewer courses than students in schools in large suburbs. Likewise, students in rural-distant schools (12.8%) had a 10-course disadvantage. Differences in student access materialized between rural-fringe schools and relatively disadvantaged rural-distant (4.51 fewer courses) and rural-remote (5.66 fewer) peer schools.

## Discussion

Our study illustrates the drawback inherent in the common practice of education researchers insufficiently describing rurality and remoteness—distinct and overlapping school characteristics that are integral to understanding place. Given vast inconsistencies in how researchers define (or fail to define) school locales, our study exemplifies how poor descriptions of place can confound research-dependent policies (Hawley et al., 2016). A field-level absence of consistency and consensus in operationalizing locale (Thier & Beach, 2019) has reified deficits that are especially salient for rural areas (Kettler et al., 2016), which were home to 19% of the U.S. population but covered *95% of this country's land* area, according to data from the most recently completed U.S. Census (2010). Within this context, our study can contribute a methodological advancement and substantive findings regarding the breadth of schools' AP offerings, one of several proxies for school-based efforts to increase gifted education opportunities.

Methodologically, our findings have shown utility gained and lost by dichotomizing schools' geographic locales (nonrural/rural or urban/nonurban) rather than embracing finer-grained data, as political science and other fields have begun to do (Lichter & Zilliak, 2017). On one hand, we advocate for education researchers' agreement on a definitional framework, an impulse that drew our endorsement of the Urban-Centric locale codes (Greenough & Nelson, 2015), at least to jump-start policy analyses. On the other hand, we recognize the need to specify locale in ways that comport with theory (Koziol et al., 2015) and avoid assuming any single coding schema to be flawless (Puryear & Kettler, 2017; Rasheed, 2020). Thus, we embrace the complexity standardized codes can afford, so long as researchers apply them in theoretically sound ways that add appropriate precision (Chen et al., 2017; Kettler et al., 2016; Puryear & Kettler, 2017).

Our comparative analysis supports descriptive findings regarding schools (Greenough & Nelson, 2015) and inferential findings regarding districts (Puryear & Kettler, 2017). We also capitalized in the domestic context on Chen et al.'s (2017) concentric, proximity-based addition to international literature in defining and measuring locale. Moreover, we compared benefits and drawbacks of multiple dichotomies and polytomies as we employed a data set that enabled us to tap into the NCES Urban-Centric codes, which offer more precision than its Metro-Centric forebears (Koziol et al., 2015). With Kettler et al. (2016), we share a characterization of the Urban-Centric codes as "convenient" but "not complete" (pp. 260–261). Consequently, we designed five approaches to harness the codes' utility and simplicity, seeking to avoid the underestimation of locale effects. Geographically precise examinations are essential for studying opportunity to learn because opportunities exist within places. Studies designed to detect presence or absence of opportunities rely on the most precise understandings of place. Therefore, our approaches offer perspective on previous analyses.

As one example of that additional utility, we provided empirical examples that can answer calls for an accounting of the growing phenomenon of exurbs, which continue to blur long-believed divides among geographic locales (Greenough & Nelson, 2015; Kettler et al., 2016). Furthermore, our proximity-based approach to locale's complexity is conceptually more parsimonious than Kettler et al.'s (2016) "dual analysis" (p. 261). Their approach required both a school's categorical locale and its student enrollment as a continuous variable. We demonstrated a way to contextualize locale further without additional statistical tests of potential interactions among variables. Still, future inquiries might compare our respective approaches to determine whether a more comprehensive or more parsimonious approach is optimal, or at least preferable, under various research design conditions.

**Key Findings**

Our five approaches to the Urban-Centric codes showed disparate results. Specifically, our polytomous approaches allowed us to observe effects of proximity on opportunities (Puryear & Kettler, 2017), in our case regarding school-based access to advanced coursework. These results emerged from our prior exploration of how operationalizations of rurality and remoteness converge and diverge (Thier & Beach, 2019) and accentuate how inequalities associated with geographic locale weaken democratic ideals that oppose ZIP code predicting opportunity (Rasheed, 2020). Employing more groups of schools revealed remoteness to be increasingly salient: disadvantages within rural and/or remote schools and effect sizes both grew observably as proximity increased from cities in concentric rings. Our proximity approach echoed district-level research on gifted education resources and services, which broadly regarded geographic locale as more predictive of opportunities than ethno-racial variables (Kettler et al., 2015). Our fully nuanced approach maximized the Urban-Centric codes, yielding double-digit differences between AP offerings in large suburbs and those in rural-distant and rural-remote areas.

Moreover, our analyses exposed the potential for underspecified geographic questions to confound policy formulation, enactment, and evaluation. Regarding percentages of schools in which students may be disadvantaged,

dichotomous rather than rural-remote groupings can vary up to 42% in terms of the frequency of schools in which students may be disadvantaged. The blunt dichotomy approach indicated that students in 48% of rural schools were disadvantaged. In contrast, the fully nuanced approach showed that students in 6% of rural-distant or rural-remote schools might experience *pronounced* disadvantages; as in prior studies, AP breadth in rural-fringe schools did not resemble AP breadth in rural-distant or rural-remote schools (Greenough & Nelson, 2015; Puryear & Kettler, 2017). Although the fully nuanced approach provided the greatest refinement, it did not offer a panacea. Estimating for 12 groups would require large, likely nation-level samples to avoid potentially severe imbalances. Despite such challenges, we have provided evidence to argue for considering geographic locale as a fine-grained categorization rather than as a dichotomy.

**Recommendations for Researchers**

We have three recommendations for researchers who intend their findings to inform policies. First, we recommend incorporating geographic locale into analyses, whenever possible: this school characteristic may explain variance in policy- and practice-relevant outcomes. Second, when incorporating geographic locale, it should be operationalized precisely using relevant theory as a guide. Third, a polytomous approach is less likely to obscure inherent variation rather than dichotomizing geographic locale. The latter might confound findings and imperil decision making. We elaborate on each of these recommendations below.

***Include locale***

Education researchers already recognize the importance of accounting for schools being coeducational/single-sex, day/boarding, publicly/privately funded, and mostly of one ethno-racial group or diverse. They pay far less attention to whether a school is located in a metropolis, a rural area near that metropolis, or a rural area far from a metropolis (Thier & Beach, 2019). Influential texts, such as *Rural Education Research in the United States* (Beesley & Sheridan, 2017), have emphasized the importance of locale but speak mainly to researchers who already spend much of their time thinking about rurality. More precise methodological choices will become typical when the conversation extends beyond self-defined scholars of place. Still, scholars who focus on rurality and/or remoteness can use our findings to keep conversations about place more nuanced than mere categorical discussions. Likewise, Biddle et al. (2019) reminded scholars of a dual responsibility to understand place deeply when making policy recommendations or when interpreting findings. Thus, we encourage the broadest swath of researchers to acknowledge complexities such as rural places being remote or not and remote places being rural or not. When that occurs, studies dispelling myths about rural areas as clones (Biddle & Azano, 2016), rural schools as inherently small (Kettler et al., 2016), and students in rural schools all living in poverty (Greenough & Nelson, 2015) might no longer be outliers.

Likewise, our fully nuanced approach suggests meaningful size and proximity variations within cities, suburbs, and towns. Even though some researchers recognize locale as a consequential predictor for students' social and educational outcomes, few studies have attended adequately to this essential factor (Morris & Monroe, 2009). Such inattention to geographical locale necessarily limits the yield of education research. Therefore, we encourage deep thought about geography, so that both research producers and consumers can all know the places that studies include or exclude, helping policy makers avoid the creation of winners in some places and losers in others.

We can speculate at least one reason that many U.S. education researchers might not focus on rural places. Universities, sites of sizable portions of research, demonstrate considerable geographic disproportionality that favors cities and suburbs. To illustrate, the College Board (2017) lists 2,282 four-year, U.S. universities. Of those institutions, 437 are categorized as rural (19.2%), 975 as suburban (42.7%), and 870 as urban (38.1%), although without defining its categories. Among 116 Research 1 institutions (i.e., doctorate granting, with the highest level of research activity), contrasts are stark. Seven such institutions exist in rural areas (6.0%), 46 in suburbs (39.7%), and 63 in cities

(54.3%). Sears's (1986) social psychology observations seem applicable here. The common practice of convenience sampling might be introducing proximity-based biases: researchers typically recruit participants at or near their universities, undermining representativeness and generalizability. Given misalignment between the vast numbers of schools in rural areas and the paucity of rural-focused research (Coladarci, 2007), it follows logically that university researchers' sampling efforts might be suffering proximity-based biases.

For researchers interested in venturing beyond their urban or suburban campuses, we have discussed several ways to unpack geographic locale. An important improvement on current practice could be wholesale endorsement of NCES's Urban-Centric codes for education research, capitalizing on their flexibility and standardizing a definition for contested terms (Greenough & Nelson, 2015). Relatedly, examining our five approaches to the Urban-Centric codes can help researchers embrace a more sophisticated view of rurality and remoteness. Such analyses might reveal that these categories are wrong-minded entirely, as Puryear and Kettler (2017) suggest regarding district-level data. Perhaps locale is not an interval variable as the codes might suggest. Attending school in any type of geographic locale should not *determine* access to gifted education opportunities, so it might merely mark other variables. Perhaps conditions in rural/remote spaces activate unknown processes that hinder access to gifted education. If so, researchers can examine causal effects that might lurk behind such labels, yielding interrogation of how community norms and social connectedness might vary based on the salience of rurality and/or remoteness.

Meanwhile, locale-informed research remains useful to identify possible gaps in opportunities for students of varying academic potential, but specifically regarding gifted programs that require both additional resources and the benefits of economies of scale (Rasheed, 2020). To curb the latter problem, education researchers can inform policy makers with locale-informed assessments of needs and feasibility for offering gifted education programs to the widest number of "able" students, not just those identified as gifted. Doing so would capitalize on lower per-pupil program expenses in the face of budget shortfalls that can plague rural-distant and rural-remote settings (Greenough & Nelson, 2015; Howley et al., 1988). Furthermore, capitalizing on scale could enable sustainability, largely by generating a critical mass of gifted students who call rural and remote places home, so they would martial their understanding and love of such places to reinvest their talents in locally resonant ways (Lawrence, 2009).

### *Operationalize Precisely*

Apple (2011) called on researchers analyzing cities, suburbs, or rural areas to account completely for implications of such designations, avoiding the typical disrespect embedded in urban-centric narratives (Cramer, 2016). The five approaches that we applied to the Urban-Centric codes can offer a certain degree of flexibility, but we advocate for specifying one's groupings to reveal the utmost complexity. By doing so, one can embrace what many researchers neglect in analyses of place: identifying explicitly which areas are included and excluded (Rasheed, 2020; Thier & Beach, 2019). Ultimately, defining geographic locale should correspond to local, state, and regional contexts for such definitions, which might vary by stakeholders' recognitions of population counts, proximity to urban areas, administrative functions, economic needs, and/or land uses (Thier et al., 2020). Regarding rural complexity, Corbett (2016) noted that if "you have seen one rural community, you have seen . . . well, one rural community" (p. 278).

By including footnotes or methods sections that detail what a study's locale bins contain, researchers can make crucial advancements. Geographic locale definitions, particularly around rurality and remoteness, require methodological and interpretive care (Hawley et al., 2016). In the absence of broad consensus regarding the role and definition of rurality and/or remoteness, Box's (1976) admonishment will continue to describe most research on schools: all models will be wrong, though some might be useful. Group comparison research depends on clear definitions of the groups of interest (Kettler et al., 2016). In describing research on gifted education regardless of location,

Callahan et al. (2014) stressed definition, identification, and education leaders' philosophical beliefs. We concur: definitions, identifications, and philosophies are highly relevant considerations for research, especially at the intersection of gifted education and rural education, where metro areas are default norms (Colangelo et al., 1999; Roberts & Green, 2013).

Thus, we suggest researchers should explicitly name the school types within and outside their groups. For this reason, we labeled our groups as blunt and postsprawl dichotomies, superimposed quartile, proximity, and fully nuanced. Differences between blunt and postsprawl dichotomies might seem trivial if comparing relative nonrural-rural access gaps or their negligibly different effect sizes in the current study. Nonrural schools offering 2.30 times as many AP courses in the blunt dichotomy and 2.90 times as many in the postsprawl dichotomy compared to their respective "rural" comparison groups might not raise much concern. But percent differences in sizes of disadvantaged groups can present enormous challenges for making, implementing, and vetting policies. Depending on how locale is defined, "rural" could be a 52%-48% minority, 69%-31% minority, or leading plurality at 32%. Without clear definitions, research consumers would not know whether "rural" accounts for both rurality and remoteness, which might represent as few as 6% of schools.

Moreover, ranging effect sizes suggest a need for policy makers to adjust expectations based on how research operationalizes geographic locale. Simplistic designs might seem intuitive but could lack requisite granularity for important decisions about increasing rigor, adding curricular breadth, or other interventions. We encourage disaggregating school data with the most precision possible to engender the best-informed comparisons, especially amid contested definitional terrain regarding rurality and potentially diverse gifted education needs (Rasheed, 2020). If one aims to mitigate challenges in rural and/or remote settings, it would be inappropriate to allocate funds haphazardly to "rural" schools unless one can detect their relative similarity, and proximity, to cities or suburbs (Puryear & Kettler, 2017).

### *Polytomous Thinking*

Dichotomous urban versus rural thinking obeys unrefined operational definitions—a recipe for misinformed conclusions. Treating communities like they are either a city or a country mouse in an Aesop fable oversimplifies real differences. Binaries might provide a comforting heuristic, but they merely produce rough cuts of data that can blind policy makers from actual needs (e.g., in rural-remote, not rural-fringe, schools). Short-handing "rural" as "poor" is a core reason why policy makers often misinterpret phenomena in rural and/or remote areas (Wuthnow, 2019). In our example, simply funding more AP programs in towns and rural areas might positively alter a nonrural/rural ratio but fail to improve actual opportunities for students in the rural areas of greatest need. Instead, we recommend the most refined cuts of data available, such as the superimposed quartiles (four groups), proximity (five), or fully nuanced (12) approaches we describe here. Using polytomous thinking, researchers can show geographic locale on a continuum, recognizing multiple ruralities rather than one "rural" way of schooling (Green & Corbett, 2013). Specifically, our proximity and fully nuanced approaches can enable context-specific solutions for various needs that gifted students in rural and/or remote areas experience (Rasheed, 2020).

Although a 12-level approach might provide too many comparisons for some circumstances, disregarding complex relations between rurality and remoteness can represent a nonignorable threat to decision making. Despite suggestions that theoretical and practical considerations should govern selection or construction of operational definitions for geographic locale (Koziol et al., 2015), we argue for polytomous approaches in most cases to facilitate good decision making. We fear that policy goals may seek expediency or feasibility based on limited knowledge of geographical locale's complexity. So, we caution against dichotomies that mask the complexity of geography (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008, pp. 28–35). Dichotomies can convey powerfully inaccurate narratives. Our study is illustrative for research producers and consumers in showing how to apply increasing complexity to the Urban-Centric codes.

In general, polytomous thinking might prompt both researchers and the policy makers their work can inform to first use quantitative analyses to identify needs and issues of feasibility broadly based on geographic locale. Second, a wide array of stakeholders could collaboratively refine those analyses toward locally resonant policy and practice recommendations. When researchers, policy makers, and practitioners collaborate, they can develop sustainable, localized education policy (Rasheed, 2020) that large-scale analyses can inform based on polytomous thinking. Operating exclusively on large-scale quantitative analyses would relegate education research that considers locale to "geographical grid work" using variables such as proximity or population density (Rasheed, 2020, p. 80). In concert, polytomous quantitative analyses alongside locally resonant collaborations that embrace criticality can respect local culture (Richards & Stambaugh, 2015), resist geographical power asymmetries and traditions of disparaging and marginalizing rural and/or remote locations (Howley, 2009; Kettler et al., 2016), and serve students in areas where gifted education needs often go unmet (Azano, 2014; Rasheed, 2020).

## Limitations

Although we conceptualize rurality and remoteness as different traits that overlap in many, but not all contexts, our view is not an industry standard. Some scholars interchange rural and remote, though we vehemently disagree. Others see an unclear correlation "between distance and the evidence of remoteness" (d'Plesse, 1993, p. 13). The concentric rings we envision might overlap in some locations. Still, scholars who sample entirely in rural settings distinguish among communities based on proximities to metropolitan areas (Dierking & Fox, 2013; Irvin et al., 2011; Petrin et al., 2014). We endorse our proximity and fully nuanced approaches because they enable quantitative analysts to emphasize rurality and remoteness jointly and separately while recognizing inherent complexities about schools and their communities. Relatedly, the Urban-Centric codes are working definitions for social constructs. Used without theory or criticality, they can further marginalize rural and/or remote places (Rasheed, 2020, pp. 64–66).

Two other limitations attend our findings. First, breadth of opportunity to learn AP content is a proxy for accessing educational rigor, but AP does not exhaustively capture the opportunities that jurisdictions have offered to serve gifted students. International Baccalaureate, dual-enrollment, and other programs serve similar purposes (Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008). Second, we set different critical values for our first four approaches than our last due to a naturally imbalanced design. In so doing, we inflated standard errors, potentially threatening our comparisons in some readers' minds. Still, relatively large effect sizes may instill confidence regarding the practical and statistical significances of our findings.

## Conclusions

Researchers do not hold a monopoly on the lack of rural awareness. One can scarcely access news from print, radio, televised, or digital sources without "urban-centric media and policy elites" confounding rurality or ignoring its nuances (Johnson, 2017, p. 1). Johnson lamented a lack of surprise for this type of neglect despite living in a country that owes most of its food, raw materials, drinking water, and air to rural spaces. Stressing the importance of understanding rural spaces within studies that delve into them, we have provided approaches to operationalizing rurality and/or remoteness in ways that might facilitate generalization and replication, particularly emphasizing the benefits that our proximity and fully nuance approaches can afford.

Specifically regarding gifted education more broadly than just Advanced Placement opportunities, the approaches we examined—especially those that best adhere to project-specific needs for nuance—can aid examinations of myriad issues of policy and practice, such as proximity-based obstacles that schools must overcome in their attempts to provide off-site enrichment activities (Badger & Harker, 2016; Greene et al., 2014; Surface, 2016). Moreover, quantifying complexities of proximity as they pertain to rurality and/or remoteness can be used to critique findings about the choices that gifted education students face when they attend rural K-12 schools but seek to fully actualize their educative/career potential,

often pushing them to leave home (Seward & Gaesser, 2018). Thus, proximity-based analyses can add a dimension to phenomena such as learning to leave (see Corbett, 2007). What if the rural area that a gifted student is learning to leave is, for example, Cabarrus County, North Carolina? Coded 41 on the rural-fringe, Cox Mill High School in Cabarrus County is an 18-mile drive, mostly on Interstate 85, from Charlotte, the nation's 15th most populous city. Certainly, some gifted students in rural contexts will not need to learn to leave. For students in that area, many robust opportunities might be immediately accessible.

Addressing concerns about the utility of the Urban-Centric codes and calls for deeper interrogations of proximity (Puryear & Kettler, 2017), our five approaches revealed varied interpretations of school data conditioned on geographic locale. Traditionally, though, education researchers have not balanced theory and practical limitations to understand the intricate geographic traits of communities. Dichotomies that seem expeditious can brand rural spaces as deviant (Roberts & Green, 2013) and mask meaningful distinctions. Perhaps due to project-leaders' perceptions about feasibility rather than their reliance on theory, research designs often hide many complex stories that data might otherwise tell about place. We suggest that too much education research neither regards geographic locale as a crucial characteristic nor applies requisite precision. Bolstered by the findings from the five approaches we compared in this study, we invite our colleagues to do both.

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# Black and Gifted in Rural America: Barriers and Facilitators to Accessing Gifted and Talented Education Programs

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Nationwide, Black students are underrepresented in gifted and talented education and advanced learner programs. These tragic outcomes occur in all demographic communities: urban, suburban, and rural. As a result, the academic and psychosocial supports needed by gifted Black students are overlooked, disregarded, and underdeveloped. Rural communities are frequently depicted as remote, lacking in social and academic experiences and opportunities, and predominantly White and economically disadvantaged. For gifted and talented Black students, these characterizations contribute to feelings of isolation and alienation in school on a daily basis. Despite their high intellectual potential, they are constantly victimized by racially oppressive conditions in society that cause stress and anxiety. The Black rural community, including Black gifted and talented students, is almost invisible in scholarship that discusses rural education in the United States. This article explores the nature of the rural communities where these students reside; shares intellectual, academic, and cultural characteristics that make Black gifted students from rural communities unique; and delineates recommendations for research, curriculum, and specific programming to meet their intellectual, academic, cultural, and psychosocial needs with an emphasis on access, equity, and excellence.

***Keywords*:** Black gifted, access to rural gifted and talented education, culturally responsive, teacher expectations

Rural communities are very complex and sometimes difficult to distinguish from suburban communities or small towns.[1] In rural communities, education systems are faced with a unique set of challenges that stem from circumstances within the surrounding environment and often require specialized solutions (Lavalley, 2018). In this article we explore the needs of Black students in rural communities, focusing on the academic, intellectual, and psychosocial needs of Black

[1] Authors' note: This article expands and reexamines previous work presented in Davis et al. (2020).

students with high intellectual abilities or who should be defined as "gifted and talented" according to typical definitions of that label. According to the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC, 2019a), *giftedness* is defined as

> students with gifts and talents perform—or have the capability to perform—at higher levels compared to others of the same age, experience, and environment in one or more domains. They require modification(s) to their educational experience(s) to learn and realize their potential. Student with gifts and talents:
>
> - Come from all racial, ethnic, and cultural populations, as well as all economic strata.
> - Require sufficient access to appropriate learning opportunities to realize their potential.
> - Can have learning and processing disorders that require specialized intervention and accommodation.
> - Need support and guidance to develop socially and emotionally as well as in their areas of talent. (p. 1)

In this article, we delineate several of the factors that create challenging circumstances for Black gifted students as they seek to access specialized program services and coursework that match with their advanced intellectual abilities. We also make recommendations to add to the limited research and specific best practices that may guide researchers and practitioners with an interest in the needs of Black gifted students who originate from rural communities. We conclude by considering how gifted education as a field can become more inclusive, ensure that talent from all communities becomes a focus for all our work, and produce innovative outcomes for Black gifted students, regardless of their geographic location.

## The Nature of Education for Black Students in Rural America

Several states in the U.S. Southeast are noted as having sizable populations of Black students attending rural schools (Snyder et al., 2019; U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation & U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2015), such as Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee. Students in these states and others are drastically lagging behind in performance compared to their peers across the nation (U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation & U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2015). Mississippi has the highest percentage of students attending rural schools of any state in the nation (Showalter et al., 2017). Black rural students attending schools in these states face daily challenges that limit their access to equitable, high-quality educational opportunities. Among these students are those who should have access to gifted and talented education (GATE) and advanced learner opportunities. Additional challenges faced by rural area students include (a) the multifaceted definitions of rural areas, (b) the complex nature of distance and isolation in rural areas that impact access to higher education opportunities, (c) extreme poverty levels, and (d) a high number of low-performing schools in rural communities across the nation.

As we explore the needs of Black students in rural communities (with some attention to other students of color), we focus on communities defined as rural. Rural communities are very complex and sometimes difficult to distinguish from suburban communities or small towns. Herein, *rural* is defined as the complex range of geographically isolated communities with populations between 2,500 and 20,000 (per Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008). Nationally, one-fourth of all public school students are enrolled in rural area schools (Showalter et al., 2017). In three states, more than half of their students attend rural schools: Vermont (57.5%), Maine (57.2%), and Mississippi (56.5%). In Mississippi over 49% of the student population is Black, and Alabama, Tennessee, and Georgia also have sizable populations of Black students (Snyder et al., 2019). In rural communities, education systems are faced with a unique set of challenges that stem from circumstances within the surrounding environment and often require specialized solutions (Lavalley, 2018).

Isolation and disconnectedness from metropolitan areas are two of several key factors associated with many of the problems experienced by Black students living in rural America. Being isolated and disconnected from urban area

resources may limit student access to cultural and enrichment opportunities that have much potential to expand their educational experiences. Distance and funding also pose challenges for rural area families in accessing resources that may be located in metropolitan areas. A classic example are summer and weekend opportunities hosted on urban or metropolitan college campuses, which may be inaccessible to rural area students, including programs for gifted and talented learners. With such limited access, even Black gifted and talented students have the potential to fall behind and be disadvantaged when it comes to competing with their urban or suburban peers who come from communities with better resources.

In addition to these problems, the tragic effects of poverty are undeniably a significant factor in the challenges and complexity schools face in equitably meeting the needs of rural students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds. The impact of poverty on educational engagement has been documented (e.g., Alsbury et al., 2018; Jensen, 2013). Living in the South places Black rural students at a particular disadvantage. Due to the impact of race and income iniquities, Black rural students are doubly disadvantaged (Ford, 2013). Twelve of the top 15 states noted as having the highest percentage of low-income students are Southern states—which also have the highest percentage of schools located in rural areas (e.g., Mississippi, Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Louisiana). There is a higher concentration of free and reduced lunch schools in rural areas than in urban districts. According to Showalter et al. (2017), a significant and disproportionate number/ percentage of students in poverty attend schools in rural communities. Based on a report published by the Southern Education Foundation (2015), for the first time in the nation's history most public school students are living in poverty.

Poverty in rural schools is further complicated by the lack of qualified educators available to meet the needs of students living there. Many of the personnel found in rural schools are forced to take on multiple roles in the school and district to meet students' varying needs, albeit with significantly less funding compared to schools in more affluent and densely populated areas (Howley et al., 2009; Superville, 2020).

### Lack of Access to Opportunities

Literature is very limited on the presence and educational needs of Black students who are or have potential to be identified as gifted and talented while living in rural communities. Scholarly work on high-potential and gifted and talented students in rural schools focuses primarily on White students in rural communities (Howley et al., 2009; Stambaugh, 2010). All too often, educators hold low expectations for rural, Black students and fail to create equitable opportunities for them to demonstrate their abilities and thereby be considered viable candidates for gifted programming and services (Floyd et al., 2008).

Ong's (2011) and Singer's (2011) research in rural, low-income communities found a lack of appropriate resources in schools to help students compete with their counterparts in wealthier and better-resourced school districts. Equity and excellence are compromised, hindering the potential of Black and other minoritized students. While this work continues to draw attention to the needs of rural-area gifted and talented White students, little work has been directed to the intellectual, academic, cultural, and affective needs of gifted and talented Black students attending schools in rural communities. This lack of scholarly attention presents an incomplete view of life as Black students growing up in a rural community seeking higher-level educational opportunities, and in some cases suggests that these students do not exist (Ford, 2015).

### Meeting the Intersectional Needs of Black Students in GATE Programs

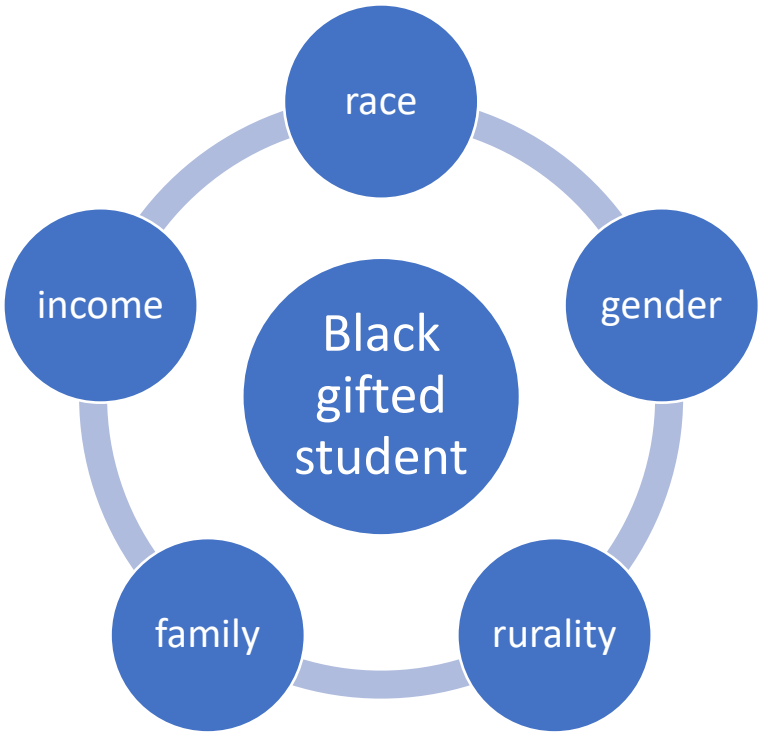
Black students are systematically underrepresented in GATE programs nationwide. While Black students comprise 19% of schools nationally, only 10% of students in GATE programs are Black (Ford, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Estimates of national data (U.S. Department of Education, 2016) indicate that Black students are consistently underrepresented at a rate of 40–55% each year. According to Ford, Wright et al. (2018), when equity is quantified, Black

students should represent a minimum of 15.2% of students in GATE programs nationwide. These data clearly note an egregious problem that thousands of Black students continue to lack access to high-end, advanced-learner programs, GATE programs, and other offerings typically made accessible to White and Asian students daily (Ford, Wright et al., 2018). A disaggregation of the Office for Civil Rights data for rural districts is needed to allow school personnel, families, and advocates to better understand the full scope of underrepresentation in rural GATE programs.

From an intersectional viewpoint, to better understand the needs of Black gifted and talented students, we must more clearly understand the impact of race, gender, culture, rurality, community, and income on functioning (see Figure 1). Being Black places students in a historical and contemporary oppressed group. The Black community typically has less access to a quality education, has the highest percentage of incarcerated individuals, and has more students disproportionately suspended, pushed out, and expelled from schools (Crenshaw et al., 2016; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Smith & Harper, 2015). Such unjust practices occur nationwide, but especially in the Southern states. Concomitantly, students with a poor discipline record are less likely than others to access services offered in GATE programs. Noteworthy, Black students are also less likely to be referred for GATE programs compared to their White peers with similar achievement levels and family backgrounds (Grissom & Redding, 2016). Some scholars have examined the nature of rural living as an additional construct to understand what differentiates rural students from their counterparts in other geographic communities and the specific academic needs of rural students aspiring to attend college (Chambers et al., 2019).

**Figure 1**

*Intersectional View of Black Gifted Students From Rural Communities*




*Source*: Davis et al. (2020), used with permission of the authors.

To rectify these conditions, educational leaders must provide specific, culturally responsive professional learning for educators, engage in focused engagement with the Black community, and hear about the lived experiences of Black gifted and talented individuals in rural communities. In rural communities, Black students are more likely to live in closer proximity to family. These individuals also may be a source of support that school leaders may draw on in developing responsive structures within the school for Black gifted and talented students (Davis, 2008, 2010, 2016). Based on this work, establishing effective school and home partnerships with Black community to enrich the GATE experiences for Black students is highly recommended.

The numerous access and equity barriers to GATE faced by rural Black students are much the same as those faced by their urban peers (Biddle, 2011), but there are also important differences (see Table 1). Rural students are at risk for low motivation, low academic efficacy, and poor school success and have decreased chances of success in postsecondary education (Byun et al., 2012; Hardré et al., 2009; Stambaugh, 2010). A disproportionate

**Table 1.**

*Educational, Social, and Cultural Characteristics of Urban Versus Rural Schools*

| Characteristic | Urban | Rural |
|---|---|---|
| Preponderance of low-performing schools | X | X |
| Geographically remote | | X |
| Cultural discontinuity between teachers and students | X | X |
| Physical isolation from concentrated group of academic and intellectual peers | | X |
| Limited access to technology | | X |
| Limited access to highly trained teachers | X | X |
| Limited family engagement with schools | X | X |
| Presumption of low intelligence | X | X |
| Low teacher expectations | X | X |
| Historical legacy of segregated, low-resource schools | | X |
| Limited availability of social and academic enrichment | X | X |
| Distance from concentrated enrichment resources (arts, corporate, sciences) | | X |
| Distance from resources of higher education | | X |
| Economically impoverished communities | X | X |
| Low educational attainment of parents | X | X |

*Source:* Davis et al. (2020).

percentage of students whose parents did not attend college are Black, as noted by Falcon (2015), who delineated barriers facing students, including being prepared for and adjusting to college. These students have other unique challenges as they contend with negative perceptions based on their oppressed group status; living in isolated communities with fewer cultural enrichment experiences; originating from communities that continue to suffer from vestiges of systemic racism and discrimination from the Jim Crow era, which especially impacted Southern states; and the risks associated with living in poverty, including being first-generation college students (Hébert & Beardsley, 2001; Hines, 2012).

One case study of a third-grade gifted and talented Black male, Jermaine, who attended a rural school provides evidence of the challenges faced in rural schools for high-potential black students. Being a rural area gifted and talented Black male in his environment, Jermaine suffered from challenges of being isolated, fitting in, racial identity, and being misunderstood as a complex racially diverse student with gifted abilities and talents. According to the researchers, too few of Jermaine's teachers recognized his gifted potential (Hébert & Beardsley, 2001). A case shared by Davis (2016) demonstrates how a rural Black student in a GATE program suffered from bullying by his gifted counterparts and peers in high school programs and athletics teams.

Gifted youth from rural areas are also at risk for underachievement due to the limited experiences of family members in advanced learner settings and the likelihood of being a first-generation college student. Those living in poverty are particularly challenged as they attend poorly resourced schools daily. Rural schools, like those in other communities, have a responsibility to serve and identify all gifted and talented students and should make necessary changes that enable educators to identify more minority gifted and talented students (Howley et al., 2009).

### Role of Black Educators in Promoting Aspirations of Gifted and Talented Black Students

In a study of the school experiences of rural Black students, Hines (2012) found that Black students faced low expectations from teachers and, subsequently, high rates of school failure. A larger and more recent study by Grissom and Redding (2016) had similar findings, not only reporting low expectations and under-referrals for Black students who were performing at the same level as White students, but also reporting that Black students were more likely to be referred to GATE screening if they had a Black teacher. Noteworthy is that only 7% of teachers in the United States are Black (Taie & Goldring, 2020; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019b); in rural communities, only 3.6% of teachers are Black. To say that these data are troubling is an understatement. Having more Black teachers in rural schools would dramatically increase Black students' chances of academic success and successful life outcomes. This has been found in the important work of Easton-Brooks (2019) on ethnic matching: students who share the race or ethnicity of their teachers often achieve at higher levels.

Teachers in rural schools also often lack access to specialized training about the nature of gifted and talented learners within their communities (Howley et al., 2009; Stambaugh, 2010). Further, nationally, teachers have little or no training (e.g., professional development and/or coursework) on being culturally responsive/competent. In short, as more attention is drawn to the needs of diverse populations in all schools, including rural schools, and the multiple and complex challenges of increasingly diverse populations, educators will face more difficulties in meeting their specific needs (Davis, 2019). Bryan and Ford (2014) recommended increasing the presence of Black male teachers across all districts to impact student success.

More problematic is the role of classroom teachers in the identification of gifted and talented students and as providers of related service options. Chambers et al. (2019) posited that educators categorized as "dreamkeepers" were needed in schools to empower and encourage rural students

aspiring to attend college. Some educators presuppose that rural students are less intelligent and have lower aspirations than students in other demographic communities. Thus, for highly able, gifted and talented Black students in rural schools, low teacher perceptions can have a negative impact on their school success, despite their high level of potential. Dreamkeeper teachers (Ladson-Billings, 2009) are critical to Black student success. Chambers et al. (2019) noted that such teachers are "percolators of student dreams but also actively convey their hopes and dreams, catalyzing student dreams of further education. Within rural education contexts, there are not enough Dreamkeepers" (p. 7).

In a study of developmental factors associated with rural area Black adolescents, Murry et al. (2016) described positive peer influences and the role of families who encourage academic achievement. The authors also discussed the impact of caring teachers who hold high expectations for the youth's abilities as important to school success. Davis (2010) also described the use of social and cultural capital of immediate family members, extended family, and the church community as substantive means of support for Black gifted students.

**Mediating Isolation in Rural Schooling**

Being geographically disconnected from a concentrated culturally and socially enriched community often leads to feelings of isolation with rural students. Feelings of isolation from a common peer group can be detrimental to students' performance (Harris, 2006). Being Black *and* gifted in a rural school environment exacerbates these feelings of disconnectedness. When racially and culturally different gifted and talented students enter new programs with a group of students who are markedly different from them in income, race, ethnicity, language, culture, and experiences, their self-esteem, self-concept, and racial pride may suffer. Students need to feel a strong sense of belonging and acceptance to be recruited and retained in GATE programs, even more so for Black and Hispanic students due to underrepresentation. Cohort groups combat the effects of isolation and increase assurance of a more comfortable "fit" for students of color to focus more on the academic challenge and less on their need for acceptance. Educators are encouraged to develop service models to identify small groups of students and cohorts who can move through programs together with their social, cultural, and intellectual peers (Davis, 2015).

Cultural mismatch may also cause Black gifted and talented students to feel disconnected and isolated from their peers. Recruiting, training, and retaining a highly qualified teaching force composed of teachers of color is a national issue, along with too few educators, especially those with backgrounds in gifted education and training in cultural competence (Davis, 2019; Sleeter et al., 2015). This cultural mismatch affects student performance and success outcomes. To bring more clarity to this point, Easton-Brooks (2019) emphasized the importance of highly qualified teachers of color in classrooms with students of color. His contention is supported by interviews with teachers of color who have been instrumental in leading their students of color to academic success.

Theorists suggest that, in the absence of teachers of color, the use of culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy can mediate the effects of cultural differences and improve student achievement (Ladson-Billings, 2014). School district leaders must ensure that all teachers, including those responsible for working with gifted and talented students and GATE programs, are trained in cultural competency. This training helps educators understand how their perceptions and conscious and unconscious biases affect students and how they interact with their entire educational community (Davis, 2019). Appropriate professional development is the first step to addressing the needs of Black and other students of color in our schools and ensuring their access to GATE programs (Ford, 2011).

Distance learning and the correct use of technology can help alleviate challenges found in rural areas by bringing people together. Use of distance learning and online learning technologies in rural schools has enriched curricular opportunities for students previously relegated to studies available only in the general education

curriculum (de la Varre et al., 2010). Technology helps connect students in rural schools with the world outside their isolated communities through videoconferencing, advanced classes, and research (Floyd et. al., 2008), and online and distance education programming has the potential to provide enhanced curricula, academic peer grouping, and access to highly trained classroom teachers (Hébert & Beardsley, 2001). While these options are becoming more readily available to students living in rural communities, ensuring that high-potential Black students have access to emerging technology remains a challenge. This inequality has been further highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for virtual learning for students. As noted earlier, in districts that rely solely or extensively on teacher recommendations for GATE and advanced learner programs, Black students are less likely to be referred and therefore may continue to be shut out from enriched and higher-level curriculum available to non-Black students, including online and distance education programming for advanced students.

The challenges of regional programs designed for rural area gifted and talented students, including transportation, enabling students to have a sense of connectedness to the home school, and establishing a community of learners, are all issues of concern that need examination as accessing effective options are considered for Black rural area gifted students (Howley et al., 2009; Stambaugh, 2010). Currently, 15 states offer statewide or regional academic-year high schools for gifted and talented students (NAGC, 2019b), including states with significant rural populations: Alabama, Kentucky, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, and Texas. Of these states, Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee also have sizable populations of Black students attending rural schools. Ensuring equitable admissions procedures for regional programs remains a challenge, as identification procedures likely mirror local district identification models. As such, Black students may continue to be overlooked and lack access to sophisticated regional programs designed for gifted and talented students. Improving the capacity of teachers to recognize gifts, talents, and high potential in Black rural students will remove barriers to the more sophisticated teaching and learning environments provided through online learning and other types of high-end regional school programs.

Regional programs and online programs have potential to mitigate the effects of geography and small class size and provide expertise that is often not available to Black rural area students in low-funded, low-performing school districts (Hines 2012; Redding & Walberg, 2012). The cost of such programs may be a burden, however, to very small schools on limited budgets that attempt to provide service options for a few students. In some cases, rural districts have formed sophisticated regional consortiums with local universities to provide access through technologies not available to single schools or districts. The advantage of these online distance learning models is that they are more feasible and learner centered, thus more attractive to district leaders responsible for curriculum planning and delivery (de la Varre et al., 2010). Nonetheless, the challenge remains of ensuring that Black gifted and talented students have access.

Dual-enrollment models that allow high school students to take college-level courses for high school and college credit simultaneously are available in some districts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019b; Zinth, 2014). These models enhance the capacity of GATE programs to reach more students attending rural schools. Zinth (2014) discussed strategies used by rural schools to lessen burdens of cost, transportation, and other challenges. Efforts to alleviate logistical challenges are encouraging. A recent report from the National Center for Education Statistics (2019b) indicates that nationwide only 27% of Black students were enrolled in dual-enrollment courses compared to 38% of White students. This low representation may indicate access difficulties that Black students experience in schools nationwide.

### Importance of a Culturally Responsive Education for Gifted and Talented Black Rural Students

Ford (2011) conceptualized five components of multicultural education (here referred to as culturally responsive education), based on the works of Gay (2010) and Ladson-Billings (2009): (a) philosophy,

(b) learning environment, (c) curriculum, (d) instruction, and (e) assessment. When curriculum and instruction are culturally responsive, it permeates all aspects of education and endeavors to reach all students. Culturally responsive education is not colorblind; rather, it affirms the dignity and worth of students by attending to their lived experiences, interests, and needs as cultural beings (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Similarly, in a reframing of professional learning needs of teachers of diverse gifted and talented students, Davis (2019. p. 56) suggested three key features that professional learning experiences should address: (a) understanding the gifted traits, intellectual strengths, and unique psychosocial needs of diverse gifted and talented students; (b) knowing and being able to implement culturally responsive curriculum and instruction in their gifted classes and specialized programs; and (c) understanding the cultural norms and traditions of culturally diverse families and communities.

A common misperception is that Black students, because they are not immigrants or international students, do not have a specific culture (Ford, 2011). This colorblind or culture-blind view presents serious misunderstandings and clashes between Black students and their teachers. Stated another way, when teachers fail to recognize the culture of their students, in this case what it means to be a Black rural student, it will be difficult to see their gifts and talents. Colorblindness is a form of racism and can deeply impact relationships between teachers and their students (Williams, 2011). When teachers do not understand the importance of traditions, cultural norms, and belief systems of their Black students, their relationships are very limited. With Black gifted students, who may be more sensitive and insightful, this lack of teacher understanding can be problematic and also contributes to their underreferrals for GATE screening and retention in programs once identified.

A culturally responsive philosophy supports classroom and learning environments that are welcoming and personally engaging (Davis, 2019; Ford, Dickson et al., 2018). When classrooms are more welcoming and inclusive, gifted and talented Black students, who tend to feel alienated and isolated, feel more like they are a part of the classroom community. This sense of belonging is essential when there are few culturally different gifted and talented students in their classes, schools, and related activities (e.g., competitions) in a small school, as is usually the case in rural districts.

For Black students in rural communities, the church family has also been identified as a historically strong and stable source of spiritual, psychosocial, and academic support (Davis, 2010). Inclusion of faith leaders in community engagement programs has been recommended as an effective source of collaborative support for rural area Black students for whom economic and social capital are often limited (Davis, 2010). Understanding the distinct culture of being rural also has an impact on teacher expectations of student ability and capacity for high performance. Teachers whose educational experience is not in a rural community may have a distorted view of the ability of Black students (Broadhurst & Wright, 2004). Just as low expectations of urban students tend to be the norm, so are the expectations of some teachers regarding the potential of rural area Black students (e.g., Riel, 2019).

Culturally responsive education differs from traditional mainstream educational pedagogy. It is a philosophy and a process based on the fundamental belief that all cultural groups must be accorded prominence in our schools and given equal respect and value for their traditions, values, and legacies. Just as important, regardless of gender, class, religion, or physical and mental abilities, all students should be recognized in the teaching and learning process (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Culturally responsive education affirms the value of individual and cultural differences through the act of reducing or, better yet, eliminating prejudices, biases, microaggressions, and stereotypes based on sociocultural demographic variables.

In the GATE classroom, it may be assumed that students have a higher and more advanced understanding of the worth of all human beings. Gifted and talented learners possess an accentuated sense of empathy and justice. Thus, a culturally responsive curriculum aligns well with the

needs of Black gifted and talented students and with those of their peers. The truth and sanctity of cultural contributions to society cannot be overlooked or disregarded in a setting where students are more apt to question potentially false and/or questionable instructional content, such as in gifted education settings, where students are more apt to be insightful and sensitive to hypocrisy or contradictions in behavior.

Educators of gifted and talented students who teach using culturally responsive pedagogy and philosophy encourage their students to be empathetic critical thinkers—to challenge and interrogate assumptions, biases, prejudices, and stereotypes. Likewise, they examine resources and content material from a broader, more inclusive perspective that encourages gifted students to become more proactive and assertive in their approach to questioning tenets of the varied disciplines with which they interact.

Black students in rural areas, in particular those in GATE classes where they are racially isolated, benefit from seeing themselves reflected and affirmed in lesson plans and instructional materials. Children's multicultural literature expert Rudine Bishop (1982) coined the phrase "mirror and window books" to literally and figuratively reflect the crucial impact multicultural curriculum and materials can have on students of color. The obvious representation of cultural norms, contributions, historical content, and literature increases engagement, racial and cultural pride, and potentially student achievement (Bishop, 1982). White students also benefit from lesson plans that are multicultural; they learn about other groups and increase their regard for these groups. To reiterate, culturally responsive education improves relationships (harmony and understanding) among students from different backgrounds and their teachers (e.g., Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2014). The curriculum is incomplete if it is polemic and fails to promote empathy and inclusion—if students are not taught to think and learn beyond the scope of themselves, and if they cannot see others and the world from viewpoints other than their own.

## Recommendations for Research and Improved Practice in Schools

There is an urgent need for specific systematic research and exemplary models that reflect the needs of Black students in rural schools and the GATE programs that serve them. This research will contribute greatly to the skills and ability of school leaders to improve their programming to ensure equity, access, and excellence in educational service options for these gifted and talented Black students. School districts willing to form regional consortiums or partner with universities are in a promising position to develop models that serve students in intense targeted summer programs that provide advanced instruction, giving Black rural students opportunities to be exposed to university life and engage with peers from other localities. The state of Virginia offers summer residential programs on university campuses for gifted secondary students. In these environments, college faculty are often engaged as instructors and potential partners with the state-level accelerated programs. University partnerships help secure resources for professional learning and networking opportunities for educators working in rural areas while providing collaborative spaces for researchers to address the issues facing rural schools and educators (Superville, 2020).

Given the dearth of information in the literature about families of Black rural students who are gifted and talented (identified and not identified), it is highly recommended that ethnographic studies of family impact on student achievement in rural communities also be conducted. Such research will extend the understanding of the historical role of the Black community and families in promoting student achievement in various contexts. Existing programs engage the Black community and families to expose their children to advanced coursework and support services. These programs vary, but most have a primary goal of preparing Black students for success in high school and college and closing the opportunity gaps that exist between Black students and their White peers in schools across the nation. Three of these programs are described below:

1. A Black Education Network (ABEN) is an enrichment program that operates using an

ethnocentric philosophy (e.g., teaching about African culture and integrating cultural norms into courses and support services) to teach and empower Black students by offering a series of workshops for students and their parents (ABEN, 2017). The program also hosts annual professional development institute in partnership with Stanford University in California. The institutes reach audiences of educators and community leaders nationwide. The on-site sessions for students are held in schools and community centers. The science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) courses offered provide advanced instruction for students on Saturdays and during the summer.

2. My Brother's Keeper Alliance (MBK) is a program initiated in 2014 by President Barack Obama to help Black male youth reach their full potential. MBK was launched to address opportunity gaps for boys and young men of color through specifically designed activities to meet the following goals: (a) graduating from high school ready for postsecondary education or training, (b) completing college or postsecondary training, and (c) keeping participants on track and giving them second chances (MBK, 2014). MBK is part of the Obama Foundation and has developed 250 programs across the nation. The MBK program in rural Oktibeha, Mississippi, focuses on helping its members complete college or postsecondary training.
3. Tuskegee University (2020), in partnership with Verizon Communications, hosts Innovative Learning programs for minority males. These programs serve middle-school minority male students on several historically black colleges and universities, including Tuskegee University in Alabama, through entrepreneurship and tech innovation courses during the summer, with ongoing support in the academic year. One of these programs' goals is to increase minority student participation in STEM-related coursework in preparation for college and careers in STEM areas.

These program models provide extended support for high-potential Black students, whose needs are often unmet in their schools and communities. Providing these services through university and community collaboration demonstrate the level of interest and concern Black universities and community leaders have for ensuring the success of Black students, who may not be adequately served in school district programs. It is highly recommended that educational leaders examine possibilities for replication of these programs in rural communities across the nation.

The urgency for culturally competent teachers in all schools is greater now than ever. Teachers of Black students must engage in training that enables them to understand the daily challenges that students face and the systemic discrimination and personal prejudices that negatively affect the ability of Black students to reach their highest potential (Davis, 2019). In rural communities especially, where staffing is inherently challenged due to funding constraints and workload demands, educators must endorse culturally responsive policies and practices and display appropriate skills and dispositions to work effectively with Black gifted students. The literature does not presently provide examples of districts that are successfully integrating culturally responsive practices in gifted education programs. As these models are developed, replication of these best practices is recommended in rural communities serving Black gifted students (Floyd et al., 2008). Effective teachers of culturally different students understand and respect cultural differences and have a high degree of tolerance and respect for behavioral characteristics of Black gifted and talented students, which often do not fit traditional conceptions what it means to be gifted or talented (Davis, 2019; Ford, 2011, 2013).

As has been discussed, poverty adds another layer of complexity to problems facing rural students and their families. African American children in the rural South have borne a disproportionate share of

the burden of poverty in America for decades. A more thorough examination of how poverty impacts the lives and opportunities of Black gifted students is recommended. While the overall rate of rural poverty is higher than urban poverty, the difference in rural and urban poverty rates varies significantly across regions. Neither genes nor zip code is cause for inequitable treatment and ignoring specific student needs (Ford, 2013).

## Summary and Conclusion

Immediate attention is needed to fully understand and address the unique cultural, intellectual, psychosocial, and academic needs of Black gifted students who live in rural American communities. Given the 50-plus years of research and attention to the needs of intellectually gifted students in this nation, the fact that the needs of a sizable population of gifted and talented students, particularly students from rural areas, are almost completely absent from the literature is unacceptable. Due to this absence, very little is known about the most effective practices that would address the complex, intersectional, affective and intellectual needs of Black gifted and talented students who live in isolated rural areas across the nation.

From what has been reviewed, ironically, even with the uniqueness of their geographic communities, Black gifted and talented students in rural areas have more similarities with than differences from those our nation's urban centers. This article shares a glimpse into the barriers, challenges, and the unique facilitators of talent that exist for this special population of gifted and talented students. A targeted focus on cultural competency training for educators, increased funding for sophisticated technologies, and recruitment of highly qualified Black teachers are of critical importance. Inclusion and application of these practices will ensure that Black rural gifted students have access to the best curriculum experiences so they can be poised to compete with their academic, economic, and racial peers across regional groups. The fact that so many challenges in equitable identification and access to opportunities persists in the twenty-first century is telling of a field that has not dedicated itself to fully seeking out talent in all communities.

The material presented in this article makes a strong case for a much-needed research platform, improved practices, and funding to provide services for this unique population of students: Black gifted and talented students from rural communities. Concomitantly, as programmatic responses to specific student needs are generated, we suggest that the most productive innovations in the field of gifted education will come when complete inclusion of all populations' intellectual and psychosocial support needs are considered and strategically implemented on a wide scale. Rural communities comprise a substantive group of geographically important set of students; to dismiss their importance because of their racial makeup or geographic location is unethical to say the least. The giftedness in small isolated rural communities that is properly discovered and nurtured may yield the innovative solutions to our society's most complex problems.

Providing support for research and development of comprehensive best practices that can be replicated nationwide specifically targeting Black gifted students holds promise for a better outcome not just for the Black community but all who may be recipients of their productive outcomes. To say that the research in comprehensive best practices for rural Black gifted is limited is an understatement. Black students with gifted and talented potential exist in all communities. These students, their families, communities, and the educators responsible for their futures need support and guidance to develop exemplary models that can be replicated in their rurally isolated schools across the nation. Perhaps the limited number of students in sparsely populated rural communities is seen as a rationale for overlooking this population. However, the physical number of students should be of no regard to the educational policy, research, and practitioner community. The loss of even one gifted and talented mind is too much for any community, our nation, and our global community.

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# 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 placed-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 paces 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).

**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 |

**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.

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 concerningly 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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# Reflections on Rural Gifted Education in Texas: Then and Now

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Rural gifted education historically has struggled with its own identity. Limited research exists on rural gifted programming, effective ways to implement gifted pedagogy and curriculum, and how to maximize limited time, resources, and funding. Rural communities are complex, dynamic entities, full of nuances and guided by a sense of place and rural culture. Faced with limited funding, resources, and time, rural gifted programs struggle to provide consistent quality enrichment to gifted learners. This study reflects on how rural gifted education policies and procedures in Texas have evolved over the last 30 years and the realities of providing gifted programs in rural school districts. Findings highlight a need for written policies and procedures for gifted programing, challenges gifted teachers face in rural districts, and the positives of being educated in a rural gifted program.

***Keywords*: rural gifted education, rural students, rural education, teacher perspective**

Cecelia Boswell grew up in a rural Texas and began her teaching career in a small, rural school in Texas. Her first class was composed of 12 students, grades 4–6. They were the first students to be identified for gifted and talented services and her first time teaching gifted learners. The town itself had a population of only 2,500; towns surrounding it were of similar size. The nearest "large" town, with a population of 8,000, was 20 miles away. The nearest city of more than 100,000 was 100 miles away. As Dr. Boswell looks back at this experience, she wonders, what could the school have done to offer better gifted and talented services than three hours once a week? The fact that the district offered this service over 30 years ago is good, but was it enough? What influences created the opportunity for gifted services? What challenges did both the school and she face? Understanding the evolution of gifted programming in Texas provides a holistic view of the struggles and successes of rural gifted education. With this in mind, the researchers share the historical context in this paper.

In a previous study (Lewis & Boswell, 2020) we explored the types of teaching experiences teachers of gifted had, along with the types gifted programming and services offered, in small, rural, and remote districts in Texas. In addition, we sought to understand the challenges and value of gifted programming in these communities. Diving deeper with a series of semistructured interviews, we explored the perceptions of teachers regarding the implementation of gifted programming in rural schools. These reflections, coupled with a document review of the available gifted education policy handbooks, provided further insight into the struggles and benefits of rural gifted education.

In the present article, we expanded on this research by exploring the following questions:

1. How do district gifted education policies and programming operate within rural schools?
2. What are some of the best practices for maximizing limited resources, time, and budgets?

## Identified Challenges Within Rural Gifted Education

### Context of Rural Education

Most educational research focuses on best practices, benefits, and challenges of urban education; limited research addresses education in rural settings. This lack is surprising considering that half of the nation's schools are located in rural areas (Howley et al., 2014). Fifty-seven percent of the K-12 public schools in 2013–14 were located in rural areas, and 24% (~9 million students) of the total U.S. K-12 public school population were registered in a rural school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; Rural Poverty Research Center, 2004).

Understandings of the classification of rural school districts are vital to understanding the uniqueness of rural gifted programming. Corbett (2016) stated, "The more we know about rurality, the less we know, it seems, as the old saying goes, if you have seen one rural community, you have seen . . . well, one rural community" (p. 278). Rural school districts and communities are defined by various physical attributes, such as geography (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2018) and population density (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018), as well as more intangible qualities, such as a sense of place and rural culture (Eppley et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2014; Lewis & Boswell, 2020). Considering these factors, caution is needed when making generalities about rural education and communities (Burney & Cross, 2006; Coladarci, 2007; Glauber & Schafer, 2017). The working definition of *rural education* for this article aligns with the NCES definition of *rural*, which considers population density as a defining factor, coupled with the influence of a sense of place and the role of rural culture (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

#### *Role of Poverty*

The United States shows regional differences in rates of poverty, with higher percentages of students living in poverty in the West and South (NCES, 2020). Rural areas tend to have higher per capita rates of poverty than do urban areas, but nationally the percentage of those living in poverty in rural areas is lower than those living in poverty in cities and towns (National Center for Educational S, 2020). Poverty in rural areas contributes to low educational attainment and higher unemployment rates (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2018). Rural poverty is influenced by relational factors, such as situational and generational poverty, as well as a lack of access to services such as health and education (Jensen, 2009). Situational poverty occurs a family falls below the poverty line due to a sudden event, such as a natural disaster (e.g., hurricane, pandemic) or personal events (e.g., death of the head of the household, divorce, or job loss). Generational poverty occurs when a family has lived below the poverty line for two or more generations. The role poverty plays in educational attainment, or lack thereof, is well documented (Jensen, 2009; Slocumb et al., 2018). Poverty limits the manifestation of gifted characteristics recognized by traditional identification measures (Slocumb et al., 2018). Persistent poverty influences students identified for gifted services in all settings, but because of the reasons cited above, perhaps more so in rural areas (Howley et al., 2009).

### Rural Gifted Education

The 2013–2014 Office for Civil Rights report estimated 3.3 million students enrolled in gifted/talented programs, which is about 8% of the total student population across the country (Office for Civil Rights, 2014). The 1971 Marland report to Congress reported that the target percentage of gifted/talented students is 5–7% of the total student population (Marland, 1971). Applying this standard to rural areas, about 500,000–800,000 students should have been identified as gifted in rural settings in 2013–2014.

The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) developed the *Pre-K–Grade 12 Gifted Programming Standards* (2010, 2019) as a guide for districts in developing programming and services for gifted/talented learners. The six standards, Learning and Development, Assessment, Curriculum and Instruction, Learning Environments, Programming, and Professional Learning, provide evidence-based best practices based on student outcomes. While the standards set a benchmark for

gifted programs, districts have the leeway to implement them in ways to best fit their area. This is essential in rural areas, where often gifted programming must do more with less and be flexible in program delivery (Lewis, 2015). The struggles of providing high-quality gifted programming in uniquely rural areas is explored in current literature (Azano et al., 2014, 2017; Lewis, 2015; Lewis & Boswell, 2020; Richards & Stambaugh, 2015). Limited funding, resources, and time are the three core factors affecting rural gifted programs.

### *Limited Funding*

Persistent poverty in rural areas not only affects the lives of students but also significantly impacts school district budgets. Low-funded school districts must stretch available funds across many programs and resources (Howley et al., 2009). Rural school districts operating on small budgets provide smaller allocations for all aspects of gifted programming (Kettler et al., 2015). Gifted programming may not always receive adequate funding to meet all students' needs or may need to share human resources with other programs. Rural districts are allocated fewer funds and personnel for gifted programming than are nonrural schools and economically disadvantaged schools (Kettler et al., 2015). Gifted specialists may serve multiple buildings, be shared across districts, or serve in other leadership capacities outside of gifted services (Howley et al., 2009). Recruiting and retaining gifted specialists in small rural schools is another challenge caused by limited funding. Without the funding to attract and retain a gifted specialist, districts may assign the gifted and talented program to a teacher without a background in gifted education.

### *Limited Resources*

Another factor impacted by the limited funding is the quantity and type of resources available to rural schools. Rural schools often have fewer opportunities to participate in gifted education (Kettler et al., 2016) and offer fewer advanced academic programs compared to urban schools, where International Baccalaureate programs, AP courses, and honor courses are often the norm. Limited funding directly impacts the availability of curriculum resources for all aspects of gifted programming. *Funding* refers strictly to the dollar amount budgeted to all aspects of gifted programming. Rural districts may be faced with deciding on spending their budget on curriculum materials or assessment materials. Districts that spend the money on identification materials are left with the basic curriculum within the district or rely on the gifted resource teacher and classroom teacher to design gifted curricula (Azano et al., 2014). In theory, gifted specialists and classroom teachers with a background in gifted curriculum pedagogy are successful in developing curriculum materials. However, the margin of error may be significant here if the teachers are lacking in background knowledge or the planning time to develop a quality gifted curriculum (Burton, 2011; Lewis & Hafer, 2007).

Rural school districts may face an overall decline in the student body population, which contributes to a decline in resources, as well as an additional focus on ways to consolidate programs to ensure program survival (Howley et al., 2009). Consolidation of resources takes many forms, including the number of responsibilities educators must take on in rural school districts. For example, the gifted resource teacher may serve multiple buildings and/or wear multiple leadership hats within the district. As a result, the gifted resource teacher has to be strategic in planning limited time with the gifted students, ensuring time for referring, identifying, and serving gifted students. Limited budgets also play a role for targeted professional learning for classroom teachers and gifted specialists, as well as the resources for identification, assessment, and program delivery.

### *Limited Time*

Limited time is a challenge for providing gifted programming in rural districts (Azano et al., 2014, 2017; Lewis & Boswell, 2020). Often the pressures of state standardized testing result in focusing on raising students to meet proficiency standards rather than excelling beyond proficiency. Some rural districts do not set aside a consistent time block for gifted programming; rather, gifted programming fits in when there is time. In districts with structured time blocks once a week for gifted services, the gifted resource teachers often struggle to meet with all of

their students, as well as juggling multiple hats, which require their attention elsewhere. One effect of this limited time is that the general education classroom teacher is asked to provide differentiation within the curriculum for advanced learners. Unfortunately, these teachers may have limited expertise in effective instructional strategies for the gifted students (Azano et al., 2014, 2017). The impact on gifted students is either more of the same type of work or no differentiation at all in the classroom.

Time is also a constraint of the student schedules, which may not allow for gifted activities due to extracurricular sports, afterschool jobs, or other family obligations. Community influence plays a significant role in rural culture. Athletics, especially football in Texas, is heavily valued and provides a sense of place within rural communities. With the increased value of athletics, the number of opportunities for intellectually challenging afterschool activities are often decreased (Burton, 2011). Additionally, students within rural communities often contribute to the family business and farms or their afterschool job to provide additional income for the family (Petrin et al., 2014).

Rural school districts reflect a population whose diversity includes cultural, linguistic, economic, and geographic diversity. When factoring in the impact of rural culture and sense of place on rural school communities, appropriate services with best practices are challenging (Lewis & Boswell, 2020). These factors combined create a challenge for educators to employ effective gifted curriculum and instructional strategies for roughly half of the nations' school districts (Eppley et al., 2018; Lewis & Boswell, 2020; VanTassel-Baska & Hubbard, 2016).

**Rural Gifted Student Perceptions**

Few current studies have examined the rural gifted student's perception of gifted education. Gentry et al. (2001) explored the differences in student perceptions of their class activities between rural, suburban, and urban schools. Their findings indicated that rural gifted students had higher levels of enjoyment in elementary school, yet less challenge and interest, than peers in urban or suburban schools. The higher levels of enjoyment from school may be a benefit of the smaller class sizes and sense of belonging found in rural schools. Within this study, Gentry et al. found that the levels of enjoyment in class activities decreased in middle school for all populations, yet more so for the rural gifted students, along with their challenge and interest levels. Middle school historically is a challenging time socially and emotionally for gifted students, so some decline in enjoyment levels is to be expected; however, it is concerning the rural students all experienced further declines in levels of challenge and interest. Gentry et al. recommended focusing on ways to integrate challenge and collaboration among rural gifted peers, as well as collaboration among teachers to maximize limited resources.

Research shows that rural gifted students thrive when they are given the opportunity to be academically challenged (Azano et al., 2014, 2017; Ihrig et al., 2017). Gifted students benefit from collaboration with like-minded peers, differentiated curriculum, and accelerated curriculum. One challenge in rural schools is the limited accelerated course offerings, such as AP or honors courses. Rural gifted students who are accelerated sometimes face challenges of running out of curriculum or not enough gifted students to make enrollment for a course offering (Seward & Gaesser, 2018). Online courses offer a solution to the limited offerings in rural schools. Blended online learning environments provide accelerated learning through individualized educational plans, where gifted learners excel (Swan et al., 2015).

Rural gifted students may experience barriers related to their language, cultural background, and/or poverty, which influence their identification as well as retention in gifted programs (Howley et al., 2009). Negative or indifferent student perceptions toward being identified as gifted are often the result of misconceptions of gifted education, teachers without gifted expertise, and vague gifted programming.

**Gifted Education in Texas**

Educators across the United States view Texas as a leader in the field of gifted education due to its program policies and curriculum requirements. Texas passed its first gifted education legislation in

1977, which addressed the specific needs of gifted students. Texas also provided funding in 1979 for districts that elected to develop and implement gifted education programs. A decade later, the Texas legislature mandated that all districts identify and serve gifted and talented students at all grade levels. As a result, funding was no longer optional for districts but part of the district budgets. The *Texas State Plan* (Texas Education Agency, 2019b) mandates that teachers of the gifted have a minimum of 30 hours of professional development focused on nature and needs of gifted, how to assess gifted students, and curriculum and instruction for gifted learners. Additionally, an annual update of 6 hours for both teachers and administrators is required. Gifted education in Texas continued to evolve over the next 20 years, with the development of the Texas Performance Standards Project for Gifted/Talented Students in 1999. These standards not only set benchmarks for gifted education in Texas but also were influential in the development of the national gifted programming standards (Texas Association for the Gifted and Talented, 2008).

Because there are no annual requirements to submit data on the implementation of gifted education in school districts, limited data has been collected on how districts are meeting the requirements of the *Texas State Plan*. This changed in 2019 with the passing of House Bill 3, a school finance bill (Texas Education Agency, 2019a), which requires school districts to

1. adopt a policy regarding the use of funds to support the district's program for gifted and talented students;
2. certify annually to the commissioner that the district has established a program for gifted and talented students; and
3. report the use of funds within the gifted program.

With the passing of House Bill 3, Texas legislation also repealed the gifted and talented allotment funding. No longer a direct budget line, gifted funding is now a part of the basic allotment of funds for districts. The concern with the reallocation of the gifted funding is that districts will not spend all of the funding on gifted programs and services, as House Bill 3 only requires 55% of any money allotted to gifted and talented to be spent on gifted and talented programs. While the changes to House Bill 3 have added accountability measures, it also raises concerns of a loss of funding for gifted programs, especially for rural school districts operating on limited budgets.

## What Do Successful Gifted Rural Education Programs Look Like?

Rural gifted education programs are faced with many challenges in the development of and implementation of all aspects of gifted programming (Azano et al., 2014, 2017; Lewis, 2015; Lewis & Boswell, 2020; Richards & Stambaugh, 2015). However, several questions remain to be answered, including what works for rural gifted education, and how rural gifted programs are successful. The two major components of gifted programming are identification/assessment and curriculum/enrichment. Examining best practices from the field of gifted education within these two categories provides a baseline for developing effective rural gifted programming. However, these best practices must be adjusted for the unique rural culture and demographics of rural communities.

### *Identification of Rural Gifted Learners*

Gifted education begins with the student identification process. NAGC recognizes that all cultural groups have gifted individuals, that giftedness presents differently in various contexts and domains, and that giftedness is transformative (National Center for Gifted Education, n.d.). Rural gifted learners manifest their giftedness in different ways based on their lived experiences, which vary from student to student and from one rural community to another. Students may be impacted by poverty, diversity, and language barriers, as well as missed opportunities of prior enrichment experiences. While districts maintain control of their identification process, there are many commonalities among gifted programs. The identification process begins with a referral, followed by a screening, and ends with placement. Most districts tie their identification process back to the state requirements and utilize a standardized test and review of the students' records. Careful selection of the standardized tests is essential to ensure that all rural students have an equal

opportunity to be successful on the exam. Promoting PLACE (Place, Literacy, Achievement, Community, Engagement) in Rural Schools, a Jacob Javits grant, explores alternative identification for rural gifted and the use of the CLEAR (Challenge Leading to Engagement, Achievement, and Results) curriculum model (Azano, 2013). Promoting PLACE expanded the pool of eligible gifted students, as the rural schools participating had initially identified only zero to two gifted students. Adjusting the identification process based on the opportunity to learn (Lohman, 2013) takes into consideration the prior experiences, or lack thereof, for the rural student population. Localized norms, the process of comparing rural students to other rural students within the same district, adjusts for the opportunity to learn versus utilizing nationalized norms (Azano et al., 2017). Findings from Promoting PLACE validate the need for localized norms for identification and services for gifted rural students.

### *Practice-Based Evidence*

There is a long-standing call in the field of education to utilize instruction supported by strong research-based practices in the classroom. Evidence-based practices (EBPs) rapidly expanded under the call of Every Student Succeeds Act (2015). Within the field of gifted education, the NAGC programming standards provide guidelines regarding EBPs, which are established through rigorous research studies where data are collected on instructional practices and student performance on standardized tests (Walsh et al., 2015). While the concept of standardization of EBPs is commendable, the generalizability of these practices to rural areas is questionable. The myriad attributes that contribute to the uniqueness of rural school districts (Flora et al., 2015; Howley & Howley, 2006) confound the effectiveness of EBPs in rural schools (Eppley et al., 2018). Rural school districts must account for the lived experiences within their communities when determining what works. Therefore, rather than EBP, practice-based evidence (PBE) plays a more important role in determining effective gifted programming and services in rural settings.

PBE is the process of examining what works for this student in this place. Being contextually responsive, PBE explores local gifted standards, local needs, and place-conscious interventions that utilize local assets (Eppley et al., 2018). The process of establishing PBE begins with a review of current EBPs, reflecting on how and why they are not generating effective outcomes in the rural setting. Next, PBEs are established by reflecting on the contextual factors, including localized gifted norms, followed with the creation of a local PBE, as well as measures for assessing student outcomes (Eppley et al., 2018). Utilizing PBE as a standard for creating gifted programming that works for the uniqueness of each rural community ensures gifted education in rural settings provides meaningful experiences that reflect the unique time, resources, and funding available for gifted students in that locale (Lewis & Boswell, 2020).

The CLEAR curriculum draws on the theoretical frameworks proposed by Tomlinson (2017), Kaplan (1996), and Renzulli (1999) but focuses on sustainability beyond the Javits Grant (Wu, 2017). The CLEAR curriculum is a low-cost built-in curriculum framework aligned with Common Core State Standards and is prestructured, ready for implementation, reducing the amount of planning for classroom teachers. Thus, the CLEAR curriculum is more likely to be utilized effectively by classroom teachers in the long term (Wu, 2017).

Rural school districts grapple with many logistical challenges in serving gifted students, including small numbers of identified gifted learners, where there may not be enough students per grade or building to allow an advanced class to be delivered, and limited resources for curriculum and gifted specialists. Flexible thinking that upholds an expectation for quality curriculum and instruction is essential in developing a gifted programming model that works for the rural district (Lewis, 2015). Rigorous gifted curricula that require only the use of current district resources, are easily integrated, do not require a huge time investment, and are not cost-prohibitive enable rural gifted programming to provide meaningful experiences for the gifted.

## Methods

### Participants

A convenience sample of four rural public school districts in Texas participated in this study in 2017 (Lewis & Boswell, 2020). Multiple school districts, located within four different Regional Education Service Centers (RESCs), were invited to participate through verbal and written invitations. The RESCs serve as liaisons between school districts and the Texas Education Agency. Their focus is to offer services to support districts in improving student performance, increasing efficiency, and implementing legislative initiatives. Four rural public school districts volunteered to part take in the study. The following district descriptions provide a visual image and feel for the rural culture of each of the four districts (pseudonyms are used for purposes of confidentiality):

#### *District 1: Golden Independent School District (ISD)*

Golden ISD's Golden Eagles fly on flags all around the small town of 2,000. As with many small towns in Texas, the school and its athletic teams are central to the community. This central Texas community voted in a bond to build a new high school, which is nearing completion. The elementary school is 2 years old. Most of the families of the students who attend Golden ISD are involved in some form of agriculture, primarily ranching. The community of Golden has an economy based on cattle, sheep, pecans, and grains. Other support businesses include a bank, a couple of cafes and convenience stores, an insurance agency, a dollar store, a newspaper office, and a hardware store. It is the county seat, with the courthouse square as the focal point of the town. The K-12 population was 572 students; 278 (38%) are identified as economically disadvantaged, and 40 (7%) are identified as gifted. Students in grades 2–12 may participate in University Interscholastic League academic contests, and students in grades 7–12 can participate in league athletics. Future Farmers of America membership and family and consumer science classes are available to all high school students. The marching band and orchestra are active throughout the school year for grades 7–12, and music is a part of the elementary curriculum. Gifted students in the elementary school have time for a half day once a week to go to a class with the music/gifted-and-talented teacher. Their curriculum is not formalized but meets the needs of the students creatively.

#### *District 2: Goodman ISD*

Driving into the west central town of Goodman inspires the traveler to wonder where the town has gone. Only one main street can be seen, and most of the buildings are abandoned. The economy of the town of 1,100 is based on two factories, one for the agricultural cash crop and the other that mills feed for farm animals. In addition to the two factories, much of the population works in the nearby county seat or the university town of 15,000 less than an hour away. The school is the central focus of the community. With only 305 students in K-12, the school district and its athletic teams offer opportunities for community-wide gatherings. Among these students, 208 (68%) of the students are identified as economically disadvantaged, and 12 (3.9%) are identified as gifted. The elementary school is 20 years old, the middle school is housed in the former high school, and a new high school and gymnasium were constructed in 2010. The football stadium and old gym have been well maintained throughout the years since it was built under the Works Progress Administration program in the 1930s. The superintendent and principals have determined to focus on services for the gifted students. The 3.9% that are identified received services through pull-out classes once or twice a week. When possible, at least twice a month, the science teacher pulls out the high school students to work on projects as specified by the state. High school students also have college dual-credit courses for juniors and seniors.

#### *District 3: Heinemann ISD*

Near the top of Texas Hill Country, at the crossroads of three state highways, Heinemann, population 1,100, is 2 hours away from two major metropolitan areas. Its economy is based in agriculture, including cattle and horses; hunting and fishing; and the town. The main street and one street over house a variety of antique stores, high-end home furnishing stores, boutiques, tea rooms,

and a restaurant. The boulevard area offers casual seating and live music on weekend nights. The school campuses are separated, with the elementary campus in the town proper and the middle and high schools in new buildings at the edge of town on one of the major highways. The district has 591 students enrolled in K-12; 333 (56%) are defined as economically disadvantaged. Gifted services are hit-or-miss, and only 12 (2%) students are identified for services. The elementary provides a pull-out once a week, with students completing a variety of projects. No gifted and talented classes are available in middle and high school. AP and dual-credit college courses are available, but these classes have no differentiation.

***District 4: Nueces ISD***

In southwest Texas, this area is known for its commercial pecan businesses. Pecan orchards and a variety of sheep and cattle ranches are the heart of industry in this area. The town has created a new city park that offers a variety of venues for skate boarding, swimming, and music performances. A winery has a store front on Main Street, and a bakery presents pastries and breads that reflect the culture of the town and county. Two major highways run perpendicular through the town. All school buildings are gathered in a four-block area. One of the buildings is new, an elementary campus, but all are well maintained. Separate buildings for extracurricular classes are found on the perimeter of the school plant. There are 734 students in K-12; 130 (17.7%) of its students are economically disadvantaged, and 58 (7.9%) are identified as gifted. Gifted services are scattered. Elementary students receive services once a week in a pull-out. Middle and high school students are served through pre-AP and AP classes, along with dual-language college credit courses.

For this article we focus on the findings of the semistructured interviews and a document review of each district's local educational plan.

**Semistructured Interviews**

Over several months, we collected data from all four districts through an online survey provided to teachers and administrators within the districts (see Lewis & Boswell 2020). Ninety-one (78%) of the 117 respondents completed the survey in its entirety. Respondents included teachers and administrators. Survey data related to the teaching experiences, types of gifted programming and services, community support, major challenges, and the value of gifted programming to the community are presented in Lewis and Boswell (2020).

Participants indicated their willingness to participate in semistructured interviews after completing the survey. Ten respondents volunteered to participate. These respondents, who represented all four districts, were representative of demographic data of the survey respondents: 8 (80%) had 16 or more years of teaching experience in rural schools, and 1 (10%), with 16 or more years of teaching experience, was in their first through fifth year of teaching in rural schools; 1 (10%) participant was in their first through fifth years of teaching; 7 (70%) had over 16 years of experience working with gifted and talented learners, while 3 (30%) were in their first through fifth years of working gifted learners; 3 (30%) had completed the 30 hours of professional development in gifted education; and 1 (10%) also held a Gifted and Talented Supplemental Certificate from Texas.

Four semistructured group interviews were conducted with the 10 participants. The semistructured interviews took placed over during one month at four different district campuses. Each semistructured interview lasted about 30 minutes and consisted of a similar format: scripted questions followed by an opportunity for participants to share any lingering thoughts. The scripted questions were as follows:

1. How do you believe gifted students are best served?
2. What does it mean to the student to be identified for gifted services?
3. Describe optimal gifted services.
4. What challenges or barriers do rural and small schools face when developing services for the gifted?
5. What did I not think to ask?

Content analysis was used to analyze the semistructured interviews. First, we identified responses and/or phrases, which were coded based on similarities as well as the central idea of

the phrases. Next, commonalities between codes were identified and categorized; finally, we identified overarching themes (Glesne, 2016; Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

### Document Review Process

NAGC's 2010 *Pre-K–Grade 12 Gifted Programming Standards* set the standard for developing high-quality policies and procedures for gifted programming. The six programming standards were developed using gifted education theory, research, and practices. While there are many different ways to implement the programming standards within districts, they provide a framework for the creation of gifted programming models at the local levels. These standards provide EBPs of effective gifted programming. We therefore selected the 2010 *Pre-K–Grade 12 Gifted Programming Standards* as the guidelines for the document review of the districts' local educational plans.

First, a systematic document review of each district's local education plan and a review of the 2010 *Pre-K–Grade 12 Gifted Programming Standards* was conducted. Second, each student outcome and EBPs for the standards were reviewed. We examined the districts' local educational plans for any phrasing or reference that may indicate that either the student outcome or EBPs were being met. Any evidence of alignment or discrepancy was noted.

## Results

### Rural Gifted Programming

To help explore the realities, regarding how district gifted education policies and programming are operating within rural schools; we pulled the local educational plans for each of the four districts from the district websites. The local educational plan for gifted and talent programs are written roadmaps of the policies, processes, and procedures for all aspects of gifted programming within a district. In 2016, while the Texas Education Agency legislation required gifted and talented students to be identified and served, it did not required reporting annual data on gifted and talented programming to the state. However, this changed in 2019 with the passing of House Bill 3. As part of this study's data collection process, we reviewed the local educational plans for the four districts.

### Document Review Results

Discrepancies between the NAGC programming standards and the written local educational plans were extensive. A major factor in these discrepancies was the lack of a handbook on gifted and talented education policies and procedures. District 2 was the only district with a handbook; although it was a bare bones document, it provided more information than the local educational plan from the other three districts. Interestingly, District 2 is not one of the two districts meeting the 5–7% recommendations of the Marland Report to Congress for the total number of gifted students. Examining each programming standard individually, one is able to identify the alignment and discrepancy among the four districts.

- 5.1. **Comprehensiveness.**

  *Students with gifts and talents demonstrate growth commensurate with their abilities in cognitive, social-emotional, and psychosocial areas as a result of comprehensive programming and services.*

  None of the four districts identified measures to evaluate this outcome.

  District 2 did identify the types of gifted programming available: Elementary: pull-out, Middle school: interdisciplinary units of study, High school: dual-credit course offerings, and meets academic needs as well as nurture gifts in other areas such as a fine arts and athletics.

- 5.2. **Cohesive and Coordinated Services.**

  *Students with gifts and talents demonstrate yearly progress commensurate with ability as a result of a continuum of pre-K-12 services and coordination between gifted, general, special, and related professional services, including outside-of-school learning specialists and advocates.*

  Districts 1, 3, & 4 identified state standardized testing. However, no evidence of cohesive

and coordinated services were found for these three districts.

District 3 offers dual credit for government, economics, college algebra, English, and history.

District 4 offers: K-6: pull-out, Middle school: interdisciplinary units of study, High school: dual-credit course offerings as well as curriculum differentiated through depth and complexity, pacing, grouping, tiered assignment, independent study.

- 5.3**. C**areer **Pathways**.

  *Students with gifts and talents create future career-oriented goals and identify talent development pathways to reach those goals.*

  There was no evidence in districts 1 & 4 of career pathways.

  District 2 indicated that it encouraged students to graduate with distinguished achievement program diploma.

  District 3 goal was to offer 24 college hours available to qualifying students

- **5.4. Collaboration.**

  *Students with gifts and talents are able to continuously advance their talent development and achieve their learning goals through regular collaboration among families, community members, advocates, and the school.*

  District 2: Community relationships critical to the success of program, evaluated annually by teachers, students, and parents as well as community feedback collected through surveys.

  Districts 1 & 4: Community invited to nominate students for a gifted referral.

  There was no evidence of collaboration in Districts1, 3 & 4.

- **5.5. Resources.**

  *Students with gifts and talents participate in gifted education programming that is adequately staffed and funded to meet students' interests, strengths, and needs.*

  There was no evidence of how the Texas gifted allotment is spent annually in all four districts.

- **5.6. Policies and Procedures.**

  *Students with gifts and talents participate in general and gifted education programs guided by clear policies and procedures that provide for their advanced learning needs (e.g., early entrance, acceleration, credit in lieu of enrollment).*

  All four districts had local educational plans available.

  Only District 2 had a gifted and talented policies handbook available.

- **5.7. Evaluation of Programming and Services.**

  *Students with gifts and talents demonstrate yearly learning progress commensurate with abilities as a result of high-quality programming and services matched to their interests, strengths, and needs.*

  Districts 1 & 2 noted annual program evaluation shared with school board, administrators, teachers, counselors, students, and community as well as the results used to revise/update programs.

  District 4 indicated that program evaluation shared with school board, administrators, teachers, counselors, students, and community as well as that the results were used to revise/update programs.

  Districts 1, 2 & 4 indicated that routine reassessments of students not performed.

  In district 3 there was no evidence of evaluation of programming and services.

- **5.8. Evaluation of Programming and Services.**

  *Students with gifts and talents have access to programming and services required for the development of their gifts and talents as a*

*result of ongoing evaluation and program improvements.*

Districts 1 & 2 stated that the annual program evaluation shared with school board members, administrators, teachers, counselors, students, and community and that the results used to revise/update programs.

District 3 indicated that periodic program evaluation was shared with school board, administrators, teachers, counselors, students, and community and that the results were used to revise/update programs.

There was not a detailed program evaluation, past or present available in any of the districts.

The local educational plans (see Table 1) essentially highlighted the *Texas State Plan* requirements related to identification and assessment—in fact, the language was taken directly from the *Texas State Plan*. While it is commendable to follow the state plan so closely, these local educational plans not provide any specific wording related to the processes and procedures for identifying or serving gifted learners.

Table 1

*Districts' Local Educational Plans*

| | **District 1** | **District 2** | **District 3** | **District 4** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Date Local Educational Plan Issued | 5/17/2016 | 2/5/2001 | Unknown | 11/24/2009 |
| Gifted education policy handbook | No | Yes | No | No |
| Nomination referral | At any time by teachers, parents, school counselors, parents, or other parties | At any time by teachers, parents, school counselors, parents, or other parties | Unknown | At any time by teachers, parents, school counselors, parents, or other parties |
| Parental consent | Written consent required | Written consent is required | Unknown | Written consent required |
| Screening/ identification process | Once per school year | Once per school year | Unknown | Unknown |
| Identification criteria | Board-approved program tied to the state definition of gifted and talented<br>-Fair assessment of students with special needs, culturally diverse, economically disadvantaged | Board-approved program, tied to the state definition of gifted and talented | Unknown | Board-approved program, tied to the state definition of gifted and talented |

| | District 1 | District 2 | District 3 | District 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Assessment | Objective and subjective assessments: achievement test, intelligence test, creativity tests, behavioral checklists; student/parent conference, student work product | Fair assessment of students with special needs, culturally diverse, economically disadvantaged | Unknown | Fair assessment of students with special needs, culturally diverse, economically disadvantaged |
| Selection | Committee, three professional educators who have been trained in the nature and needs of gifted and talented students | Objective and subjective assessments | Unknown | Objective and subjective assessments |
| Reassessment | Routine reassessments are not performed | Achievement test, intelligence test, creativity tests, behavioral checklists, student/parent conference, student work product | Unknown | Achievement test, intelligence test, creativity tests, behavioral checklists, student/parent conference, student work product |
| Program evaluation | Annually; results shared with school board members, administrators, teachers, counselors, students, and community<br>-Results used to revise/update the programs | Committee, three professional educators who have been trained in the nature and needs of gifted and talented students | Unknown | Committee, three professional educators who have been trained in the nature and needs of gifted and talented students |

| | District 1 | District 2 | District 3 | District 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Community awareness | Information is available to parents and community so they can understand and support the program | Information is available to parents and community so they can understand and support the program | Unknown | Routine reassessments not performed |
| Learning opportunities | Unknown | Instructional opportunities for student collaboration<br>A continuum of learning experiences to lead towards the development of advanced products<br>In and out of school options<br>Acceleration | Pull-out instruction to inclusion of lesson extensions and exploration with in the regular classroom | Periodically, evaluation information shared with school board members, administrators, teachers, counselors, students, and community |
| Program design | Unknown | Annually, results will be share with the Board members, administrators, teachers, counselors, students and community results should be used to revise/update the programs | Follows Texas state standards | Information is available to parents and community so they can understand and support the program |

**Semistructured Interview Results**

Without a well-developed gifted education program whose mission and purpose are understood by the administration, faculty, students, families, and the community, challenges may be associated with student participation in the program. Misconceptions about the purpose of gifted/talented education may influence attitudes and decisions of students to participate. When the teachers reflected on what it means to the students to be identified as gifted (question 2), they reflected on how they perceived students felt. The following overarching themes emerged from our analysis of the semistructured interviews:

1. Honor; for example, “They feel it is an honor to be in our GT program.”

2. Opportunity: “A great deal of extra opportunities.”
3. Validation: “It validates to them that they are smart. I know how that is when you feel like you’re the only one that thinks that way.”
4. Means more work: “They feel as though being gifted means extra work in addition to what everyone must complete”
5. Means nothing: “I don’t think it means much, honestly. It’s hard to find time to meet. I’m starting as the GT ‘teacher’/sponsor this year. We can’t do much this semester, but next semester we will tackle those projects and present them. I know many students have been disappointed in the past.”

The themes of “means more work” or “it means nothing” to the student reflect misunderstandings of what gifted education is. The themes highlight possible areas where improvements could be made to the gifted education program. First, the theme of “means more work” centered on the development of quality enrichment activities. If gifted education means more work to students, this suggests that the curriculum is not being implemented effectively. Instead of increased rigor, depth, and complexity, the teachers are assigning students more work to complete. This is not best practice in gifted education, yet it is an unfortunate misconception of gifted education. Second, if being identified as gifted “means nothing” to students, this implies that students are not receiving quality enrichment on a regular basis in the classroom. There may be room to further develop the gifted programming. Another possible implication is that students do not understand what it means to be identified as gifted and how gifted education could provide challenging academic experiences as well as increased opportunities for career development.

To gain an understanding of the types of academic experiences gifted learners in these rural schools’ districts participated in, the semistructured interview participants were asked to share how they felt their gifted students were best served within the district (question 1). Participants indicated that the pull-out program model along with in-class group work or projects was the best method for serving gifted children. This aligns with NAGC’s 2010 *Pre-K–Grade 12 Gifted Programming Standards* recommendations for providing multiple learning opportunities, collaboration with peers of like ability, and cohesiveness throughout the gifted program. The theme of “anything would be better than what they are getting now” also emerged from this candid discussion. Several participants suggested anything would be good for gifted students. Participant 6 stated, “Whatever comes your way and some activities would be good.” These comments allude to the lack of organized gifted curriculum and instruction for the identified gifted students in these districts.

Participants were also encouraged to dream big and to describe optimal services for gifted students (question 3). The participants identified three components of optimal services. First, participants focused on the pull-out program model. Participant 1 felt that “it is good for them to be in a group with kids who are working together,” and participant 8 stated that having “to work together with high achievers because it challenges the gifted.” Participants were also quick to point out that, optimally, the students would have services every day, not just once a week during a pull-out session. When asked to expand on this notion, participants compared gifted education to special education, where the students receive services throughout the day in an inclusion setting, as well as with a special education teacher. Participants 10 and 2 felt optimal services would be gifted and talented students having interactions with other gifted kids, because in their building there were only a handful of identified gifted students per grade.

Participants felt that, along with the pull-out program, it would be important for there in-class differentiation by the general education classroom teacher. Participant 5 felt that the students “need both in-class and pull-out with teachers who have training in gifted and talented.” This second component of optimal services reflects the small size of rural schools and understanding that these gifted students spend most of the day in the regular education classroom. A few participants suggested a special school for gifted and talented students but did not feel this would be realistic given how few gifted students were enrolled in these districts.

The final component necessary for optimal gifted programming centered on teachers who have had professional development in gifted and talented. Participant 2 said "a teacher who has training in gifted and talented" was important to the development of projects and the small group instruction. Participant 3 stated "a gifted and talent specialist would be optimal." These reflections recognize two major barriers to effective gifted programming in rural schools: the limited number of teachers with training in gifted pedagogy and the lack of time the gifted resource teachers have due to multiple leadership roles.

The participants' thoughts centered on consistent time blocks for gifted instruction, the need for a gifted and talented coordinator and teachers trained in gifted instruction and pedagogy, and collaboration amongst teachers, which are consistent with the best practices in gifted programming. Yet, the qualifying comments participants inserted even as they suggested optimal services reflected a hopeless view toward gifted programming. The ideas of qualified teachers, consistent time blocks, and collaboration among peers of like ability seemed to be unattainable based on their rural school experiences.

Participants were also asked to reflect on challenges or barriers they face in developing services for the gifted (question 4). With limited time, funding, and resources, these rural gifted programs struggle to implement best practices for program development and evaluation. Participants shared that one of the barriers was the lack of qualified educators to work with the gifted students. Participant 1 stated "lack of knowledge about gifted/talented by some personnel" was a barrier. Several participants echoed these sentiments recounting the lack of professional learning time for classroom teachers, lack of number of qualified teachers with a background in gifted pedagogy as well as a lack of mentors.

Overwhelmingly, the major challenge facing these districts, from the participants' perspective, centered on the lack of time. Participants expressed concerns related to limited time for instruction, whether it is pull-out with a gifted trained teacher or working on gifted assignments during the regular education classroom; limited time for quality professional learning for classroom teachers; and limited time for identification, assessment, and evaluation. Participant 5 stated, "Time is the barrier. Time for kids, for professional learning for teachers, time for identification and testing, time for enrichment. There is nothing for these students after identification." This statement provides some insight into the the district's greater focus on identifying gifted learners than on providing services for gifted learners. Interestingly, none of the participants identified funding as a barrier to provide gifted education in their rural school district. Participant 9 stated, "We really don't have any challenges because we have all of the resources we need." This was an unexpected statement, considering the literature in gifted education suggests funding is a limitation within rural areas.

Last, we ask participants if our questions had left anything out (question 5). Several themes were identified (see Table 2):

1. *The identification process is difficult.* Participants expressed concerns about the lack of balance between their responsibilities and the amount of time to complete the tasks. Concerns centered on the time-consuming nature of the identification process impeded their ability to consistently provide quality gifted programming for identified gifted/talented students.
2. *Misunderstanding of what is gifted education.* Participants shared concerns that not only did families and community members not understand the value of gifted programming, but also teachers did not understand what it means to participate in gifted education. Participants felt that if there were a greater understanding of what gifted is, more teachers would embrace the program.
3. *We are lucky.* Participants were quick to express their beliefs that, even with the limitations with rural schools, there are many positives. These benefits included opportunities to explore nature, local mentors, and the advocacy role that the gifted resource teacher plays within the

community. The small size of rural schools was also seen as a benefit as the teachers really know all of the students, which helps with the identification of gifted students.

Table 2

*Final Thoughts From the Semistructured Interviews*

| Theme | Selected Quotes |
|---|---|
| The identification process is difficult | "Testing is a nightmare; I have to do it at my conference time and all among my other assignments and teaching [gifted/talented students] once or twice a week" |
| | "Identification is hard, even though we are identifying more ESL students." |
| Misunderstanding of what is gifted education | "Teachers' attitudes about it are not good; they don't know what it is." |
| | "Teachers are afraid for gifted students to be pulled out because they will miss class." |
| We are lucky | "[Gifted/talented education] is great for kids." |
| | "We are lucky to be in a rural area. The kids get to do many things they might not in a large school." |
| | "The rural setting is a blessing" |
| | "Because it is a small school, the teachers know the students so they can identify gifted ones who have not been identified before." |

## Discussion

### Historical Review

We sought to explore how gifted/talented education in Texas has changed over the last 30 years. Overwhelmingly, positive strides have been made within gifted education in Texas. Texas has emerged as a leader in the field of gifted education due its long-standing legislative mandates for identification and services gifted populations. The *Texas State Plan* has evolved over the last 30 years to include more accountability measures, which were previously lacking. The passing of House Bill 3 and the requirement of annual reporting of gifted programming data to the Texas Department of Education will ensure that all districts are following through on the *Texas State Plan*. The annual report will also help rural gifted programs develop gifted policies and procedures within a gifted programming handbook. This handbook should provide some clarification and direction for educators as to the questions related to how to provide services within the district, as well as the professional learning hours related to gifted education for teachers and administrators. As rural school districts revise their gifted programming, it is important to keep in mind the importance of being flexible, utilizing resources readily available (Lewis, 2015). Rather than blindly adopting a programming model, each rural district should consider their unique situation, and modify standardized gifted programming models to best fit their needs. Additionally, the *Texas State Plan* mandate for 30 hours of professional development and annual

updates has played a key role in developing effective gifted programs. The Texas Association for the Gifted and Talented and the 20 RESCs play a significant role in providing professional learning through conferences, research, and online activities.

House Bill 3 repealed the gifted allotment funding, which may negatively affect gifted programming in rural areas. It is likely that rural school districts will continue to have to overcome localized struggles of limited funding, time, and resources to provide gifted education. Keeping these struggles in mind is necessary as rural districts develop their gifted programming models and handbooks, so that they are able to ensure a high level of rigor and expectations.

### *Research Question 1: What are the realities regarding how district gifted education policies and programming are operating within rural schools?*

The first research question sought to explore the realities regarding how district gifted education policies and programming are operating within rural schools. While the findings here, based on our document review and semistructured interviews, are disheartening, they do reflect the heart of rural culture. Even though these gifted teachers experience struggles related to all of the findings in current literature—limited time, limited budget, limited resources (Azano et al., 2014; Howley et al., 2009; Kettler et al., 2015; Lewis & Boswell, 2020)—they feel rural gifted schools are a good place for gifted students. We collected these data in 2017, prior to the legislative changes in Texas. At this time, the policies and procedures for gifted programming were not required to be published in a handbook, so measuring the alignment between policy and implementation was difficult due to the lack of documentation. However, the lack of published policies and procedures illuminates the need for greater alignment between the gifted education policies and programming implementation. One can surmise that these mandates for accountability will only strengthen these rural gifted policies and procedures, which will in turn provide greater gifted programming for the rural gifted students. Texas rural school districts are making strides in delivering effective gifted programming to their diverse student populations.

### *Research Question 2: What are some of the best practices for maximizing limited resources, time, and budgets?*

To answer this question, we reviewed the literature and gathered participant feedback on the best practices for maximizing limited resources, time, and budget. When the participants discussed the optimal services for rural gifted programming, they focused on the pull-out programming model, where students would remain in the general education classroom and be pulled out for enrichment opportunities. The participants recognized the need to work closely with the classroom teacher to provided differentiated gifted curriculum. The pull-out service model, coupled with differentiation for higher levels of learning, reflects the participants recognition of limited funding and resources within their districts. The final best practice proposed by the participants was targeted professional development focused on differentiation for higher levels of learning for the classroom teacher and the gifted teacher.

Rural school districts would benefit from tapping into their teachers as a resource. It is likely that the gifted specialists have created curriculum and materials that are effective at meeting the needs of their students. Successful rural gifted programs are flexible and adept at utilizing resources readily available (Lewis, 2015). The use of EBPs is essential to providing quality-gifted programming (Eppley et al., 2018; Wu, 2017). However, these practices do not necessarily need to include pricey purchased curriculum materials. Rather, it is the implementation of PBE using the readily available resources within the district and the community with an emphasis on targeted professional learning, not only for the gifted resource teachers but also for the classroom teachers. Providing professional learning on the nature and needs of gifted learners and ways to differentiate curriculum for an advanced learner is necessary to enable classroom teachers to effectively meet the needs of advanced learners.

## Conclusions

Rural gifted education in Texas has changed over the past 30 years, evolving along with understandings of what is gifted, the characteristics of giftedness, and the role culture plays in the manifestation of giftedness. Nationally, rural gifted education is receiving more attention as researchers are seeking to understand the benefits and struggles present in these communities. Researchers are recognizing the significant impact rural culture plays in the development of gifted education. The findings of this study suggest that gifted education in rural school districts needs to be further developed in all areas of program delivery. As a characteristic in qualitative research, the findings in this study are representative of the school districts where they were collected and are congruent with findings in similar studies (Azano et al., 2014; Kettler et al., 2015; Lewis & Boswell, 2020; Slocumb et al., 2018).

There is a need for more understanding of PBE, which provides depth and complexity in rural gifted programs operating with limited time, budgets, and resources. With the passing of House Bill 3, Texas rural gifted education programs will develop gifted education policies and procedures handbooks. This increased accountability and clarity of what is gifted education should result in positive changes in rural gifted education programs. The future of Texas rural gifted education is looking bright.

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Call for Manuscripts to *Theory & Practice in Rural Education*
http://tpre.ecu.edu

**Schedule and submission dates**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Spring 2021 | January 15th | General topics |
| Fall 2021 | March 28th | Special Issue on **Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity in Rural Schools and Communities** |
| Spring 2022 | January 15th | General topics |
| Fall 2022 | February 28th | Special issue on **Rural STEM Teacher Development** |

The editors of the *Theory & Practice in Rural Education* would like to invite authors to submit manuscripts for forthcoming issues. *Theory & Practice in Rural Education* is a peer-reviewed journal published electronically twice per year, spring and fall. We are predominantly interested in manuscripts related to promising and effective educational practices in rural schools, educator preparation for rural P-16 institutions, and issues related to distinct rural populations. We invite several types of articles and/or multimedia creations, including those with an international focus: practice-based; educational innovations; partnerships for education; research-based articles; review articles; and book reviews focusing on rural education. (Please see Author Guidelines at the website for additional submission information.)

All proposals will be subject to double blind peer review.

**Dr. Kristen Cuthrell, Director**
**Rural Education Institute, College of Education, East Carolina University**
**Mail Stop 504, Greenville, NC 27858-4353 | 252.328.5748**

# Theory & Practice in Rural Education (TPRE)

## *Call for Special Issue on Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity in Rural Schools and Communities*

Guest Editors:
Jennifer L. Gallagher, Janeé Avent-Harris, Benjamin Blaisdell, and Christy Howard
East Carolina University

### ***Resistance in Rural Education***

During the past 50 years, the U.S. has experienced a strengthening of neoliberalism's impact on various social structures (Harvey, 2007). This has resulted in the decimation of trade and professional unionization, increased wealth inequality, and racial resegregation across the country. Schools continue to be microcosms of these broader injustices. As neoliberal reforms took hold in national and state policy, the stripping of collective bargaining rights has changed the work of teaching across states (Swalwell et al., 2017). School choice models have exacerbated differences in school funding between wealthy and poor students (Ravitch, 2013), and by some indicators, schools are more racially segregated today than they were in 1970 (Rothstein, 2013).

These changes have disproportionate impacts on historically marginalized groups and further cultivate power structures of racism, classism, sexism, and heteronormativity, among others. In fact, neoliberal efforts and white supremacy mutually sustain each other. In cities, this looks like Black, Brown, and working-class families being displaced through policies that aim to increase school "choice" for gentrifying white, upper class families (Lipman, 2011). While not always given the focus and attention that urban spaces receive, rural spaces have been equally, or even more so, affected by the expansion of global capitalism's reach. The overpowering neoliberal narrative that the role of education is to support standardized, individual success in a global marketplace undervalues the critical thought needed to cultivate collective political action to resist corporatization, divestment, consolidation, and other unfavorable policies that have been acted upon rural areas (Cervone, 2017). Additionally, it centers progress on a perceived norm that further marginalizes those who are already othered in rural spaces (Howley & Howley, 2010). Education reforms that center on these accountability measures produce a "zero-sum" game for rural educators to play (Schafft, 2010) and de-prioritizes, or erases, a focus on the needs of all rural students and families - those who schools and school leaders should be most accountable to.

However, within these oppressive structures, important enactments of agency make space for resistance (Giroux, 2001). Such resistance can improve lives and make rural spaces more equitable and more just. Some of the most important sites of resistance in rural areas are schools. Through research, scholars can document the counterstories of diverse students as forms of resistance. They can counter narratives of rurality that ignore, for example, the experiences of Latinx students in rural school settings (e.g. Chang, 2017). In doing so, scholars can engage the critical insights of minoritized youth in rural schools to speak back against deficit-based narratives of rural students and fashion more culturally sustaining pedagogies. Community organizations and schools can also collaborate to use the community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) of rural communities to intervene in the specific issues that those communities face from a social justice framework. For example,

Southern Echo--an organization that addresses rural education issues in Mississippi--has worked with public school students and teachers to identify and intervene in specific housing and environment inequities in their communities (Lockette, 2010). Researchers and practitioners can work with organizations and schools in rural contexts to document and develop these and other types of social justice initiatives (e.g. Grimes et al., 2013).

In this special issue of TPRE, we aim to highlight research, teaching, and curriculum that operates as resistance to neoliberal and oppressive educational policy and practice by inquiring into issues of social justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion in rural education. Theoretical frameworks that might be helpful in these explorations include rurality (Marsden, 2006), place-conscious education (Gruenewald, 2003), critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001), decoloniality (Patel, 2015), indigenous education (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008), and other critical frameworks, including but not limited to queer theory (Pinar, 2013), feminism (Fraser, 2013) and black feminist thought (Collins, 1989; Hooks, 2014). Particularly useful would be frameworks that address the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1990) of oppressions in the rural context. Practice-centered frameworks such as Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012), Equity Literacy (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015), Six Elements of Social Justice (Picower, 2012), and/or Social Justice Standards (Teaching Tolerance, 2016) could also be employed to frame or inform empirical or conceptual work. Manuscripts might address aspects of the following issues or related inquiries specific to rural education settings:

- What educational practices effectively redistribute resources or recognize differences (Fraser, 1995) in more just ways?
- How can teachers and school leaders value, integrate, and/or center funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 2006) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) in rural schools?
- What does abolitionist (Love, 2019) and anti-racist (Kendi, 2019) work look like in rural education settings?
- How do practices and phenomena in rural areas speak back to deficit ideas of rural spaces (e.g. House & Howard, 2009)?
- What does social justice education within content area disciplines (Math, Science, Social Studies, English Language Arts, Enrichments) look like in rural educational spaces?
- What are the impacts of neoliberal education reform on diverse rural learners?

This work could explore classroom practice, educational leadership, librarianship, counselor or other specialist work in P-20 classrooms and other educational settings.

Those interested in being considered for this special issue should submit a full manuscript to the TPRE system (http://tpre.ecu.edu) by March 28, 2021. Questions about possible topics or ideas should be sent to Dr. Jennifer Gallagher (gallagherj17@ecu.edu). All submissions will go through the TPRE process of double-blind review by experts in the field.

**Submission Date: March 28, 2021**
**Publication Date: Fall 2021**
**For more information, contact:** Dr. Jennifer Gallagher (gallagherj17@ecu.edu)

## Estimated Timeline

- Manuscripts Due:
  - March 28, 2021
  - Accepted on a rolling basis up until the close date
- Double Blind Review Process:
  - Approximately 2-month turnaround (April/May)
- Articles selected for Revise/Resubmit or Minor Edits
  - Revise/Resubmit Deadline: 45 days from receipt of feedback (May/June)
- Second (limited)Double Blind Peer Review Process From resubmissions:
- Approximately 1-month turnaround (July)
  - Final selection of articles selected for Minor Edits:
- Deadline: one month from receipt of feedback (August)
  - Expected Publication Date: October 2021

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# Theory & Practice in Rural Education (TPRE)

*Call for Special Issue on Rural STEM Teacher Development*

Guest Editors:
Janet K. Stramel, Ph.D. (Fort Hays State University)
Earl Legleiter (Fort Hays State University)

## *STEM Teaching and Learning in Rural Communities: Exploring Challenges and Opportunities*

All students have a right to a high-quality STEM education. Since the 1980s, a shortage of mathematics and science teachers has been recognized (Monk, 2007; Rumberger, 1987; Levin, 1985). Rural school districts face challenges recruiting and retaining in specialized subject areas. According to Lavalley (2018), the unique needs of rural education are "often obscured by their urban and suburban counterparts." Nationally 19% of all students are enrolled in rural schools, and in 13 states, that percentage is greater than 33%, and "more than 9.3 million, or nearly one in five in the United States attend a rural school" (Showalter, et.al., 2019).

### STEM Teaching and Learning in Rural Communities - Challenges and Opportunities

Darling-Hammond (1999) found that "high quality" teachers are one of the most important factors to improve student achievement. Nationally, there is a shortage of qualified STEM teachers (100Kin10, 2019). These problems are magnified when disaggregated for rural schools-as rural school districts have difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers in mathematics and science (Brownell, Bishop, & Sindelar, 2005). But the challenge of rural schools in providing effective teaching and learning is not unsurmountable.

We often hear about the less than stellar performance of the United States on the NAEP reported in the media (NAEP, 2019). Contributing factors include funding issues which makes STEM resources more difficult to access, technology gaps, access to resources, cultural challenges, and STEM teacher shortages. Rural districts face these unique challenges, as well as professional development, advanced coursework, diversity, and relevant and meaningful curriculum.

While rural educators and communities face unique challenges, they also provide opportunities. They bring knowledge, experiences, and local connections that can strengthen STEM education. When the complexities of rural spaces are acknowledged and factored in, collaborative partnerships can help to bring external and internal assets together to meet the very real challenges and boost STEM learning and teaching in rural schools. When asked about advantages to teaching STEM in rural communities, Buffington (2019) said that "people who live in these communities have applied understandings of STEM and can contribute that knowledge to STEM learning." This special issue is seeking articles from the field discussing rural school success stories of how rural districts have overcome challenges to have effective and rich STEM teaching and learning in rural schools.

### Call for Articles

This issue explores the complexities, practices, and challenges and opportunities facing rural schools and universities as they design, implement STEM teaching and learning. Articles might address issues such as:

- Recruiting and retaining a skilled STEM teaching workforce
- Technology and networking solutions to support/enhance STEM teaching and learning
- Partnerships to improve and support STEM teaching and/or learning
- Advantages, challenges, and/or opportunities to teaching STEM in rural communities

- Making STEM teaching and learning relevant in rural schools
- Community-based curriculum initiatives
- Using local knowledge in STEM education
- Promising and effective educational practices in rural schools STEM education
- Educator preparation for rural STEM teaching

Those interested in being considered for this special issue should submit a full manuscript to the TPRE system (http://tpre.ecu.edu) by **February 28, 2022.** Questions about possible topics or ideas should be sent to Janet Stramel (jkstramel@fhsu.edu). All submissions will go through the TPRE process of double-blind review by experts in the field.

TPRE Author Guidelines: http://tpre.ecu.edu/index.php/tpre/about/submissions#authorGuidelines

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# Editorial Board for Volume 10, Number 2