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Small Ponds: The challenges facing gifted students in rural communities

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Abstract

Gifted students in rural schools often face academic and personal challenges not faced by their urban and suburban counterparts, a result of the unique educational and community environment of rural settings. New technologies and programs have had some success in mitigating the effect of the lack of academic resources and opportunities available to gifted ruralites, but challenges arising from the educational, socioeconomic, and cultural environments of rural communities remain. This paper examines several studies of the educational and affective development of gifted ruralites, with reference to the author's experience as a student and teacher in rural and remote educational settings. It describes, and examines the causes of, the academic and socio-emotional issues facing gifted ruralites. The paper aims to raise teachers' awareness of these issues and link educational theory with in-practice examples that will help rural teachers educate and counsel gifted students in their classrooms.

I attended high school in a small town in southern Alberta, and was encouraged by my teachers to enrol in an International Baccalaureate program when I was fifteen. I declined not for lack of interest, fear of failure, or apprehension about the increased workload, but simply because I did not want to move; the nearest school offering IB courses was a hundred miles away. Six years later, I found myself working as a high school teacher in a small fishing village in Alaska. King Cove was an extreme example of a rural community: a town of 867 people with no road access, two flights away from the nearest city. The town's single school offered a handful of electives taught by inexperienced staff and no academic extracurricular activities, and community programs were nonexistent.

Both of these experiences illustrated to me one of the many competing definitions of "ruralness": that of isolation from the opportunities available in larger communities (Lewis & Hafer, 2007). Rural communities have alternately been described in terms of simple geography (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008), socioeconomic characteristics (Gjetlen, 1982, cited in Lawrence, 2009), and culture (Howley, 1998). Happily, none of these considerations must necessarily conflict; in fact, they can be taken together to create a complete definition of "ruralness" that is helpful in understanding the experience of growing up in rural schools and communities.

Though the educational experience of any student in a rural community is likely to be different in many ways from the experience of his or her urban peers, this difference is perhaps most notable for gifted students. Rural gifted students across the continent often suffer not only from a serious lack of appropriately challenging educational activities, but from cultural and

socioeconomic pressures specific to rural communities which can make the experience of growing up gifted even more challenging than it ordinarily is.

Educational Factors

Gifted children in rural communities, even more than their peers in urban and suburban areas, often face a distinct lack of appropriate educational opportunities; Gentry, Rizza, & Gable's 2001 study found that elementary and middle school gifted students were far less likely to find challenge or interest in their studies than their urban and suburban peers. There are several reasons for this, the simplest being the financial and logistical challenges involved in providing such opportunities in rural areas. Low student populations mean less funding per school, and yet each school is required to maintain mandated courses. This can make it very difficult for schools to offer specialized options (Howley, Rhodes, & Beall, 2009). Low populations also mean fewer teachers, yet the same mandated curriculum must be taught regardless of the size of the staff. It can be difficult to convince teachers to take on additional responsibilities when they are already overworked by having to fill multiple roles with diminished or nonexistent planning time. Lewis & Hafer (2007) also note that the small faculty sizes of most rural schools make it very unlikely that any teachers on staff will have training or experience in gifted education. Finally, any given exceptionality, including giftedness, may be represented by only a handful of students in a rural school, which can both diminish the perceived need for services and make it untenable to provide differentiation on the same model as that used in larger schools (Luhman & Fundis, 1989).

There are several significant consequences of the lack of academic opportunities for gifted students in rural schools. First, as is always the case when gifted children are chronically underchallenged in school, there is a significant danger of underachievement (Reis & McCoach, 2002). This is only intensified by the lack of intellectually stimulating extracurricular activities available to rural students. Gentry et al (2001) found that rural gifted students reported having fewer challenging opportunities and a corresponding lower level of school enjoyment when compared to their urban and suburban peers. Second, several studies (Rimm, 2002; Gross, 2002) have found links between gifted students' emotional well-being and the companionship of peers of similar ability, and it can be difficult, without the aid of gifted programs and academic activities, for bright students to find intellectual peers or friends who share their interests. Finally, a lack of exposure to educational options can translate to a lack of knowledge regarding possible life paths. Lewis & Hafer (2007) note the importance of career education and counselling designed to introduce students to nontraditional career paths they may not otherwise encounter in their education or community.

Socioeconomic Factors

Rural (and especially remote rural) communities tend to have socioeconomic climates very different from those found in urban or suburban communities. Barbara Kent Lawrence (2009) reminds us of the "brain drain" and the constant push-pull bright young ruralites experience: what is socially defined as a successful life often requires the economic mobility and high-status jobs that are available in large cities, at the cost of local roots. Those who choose to stay in local communities not only have to accept a lower economic status and fewer options for their future, but must endure the disapproval of a society that views their choice as underachievement. The emotional distress that the "stay or go" dilemma can create may be further exacerbated by a difference in expectations between family and school; it is not uncommon for rural families to expect their children to remain in the community even as teachers are encouraging them to look elsewhere for opportunity (Howley, Rhodes, & Beall, 2009).

Demographics reinforce the idea that to stay in a small town is to resign oneself to a life short of one's potential. In most small towns, the incidence of emigration is highest among young adults, who find themselves attracted to the social and economic advantages offered by urban communities. This demographic process, which has been relatively constant for over half a century, has resulted in rural communities with an age structure characterized by few young adults, decreasing numbers of children, and a large number of older adults (Johnson, 2006). Certainly, I have found that many high school graduates in rural communities in which I have lived – especially those generally seen as having "potential" – left as quickly as they could. Most were gone for good; as Howley, Rhodes, & Beall (2009) note, the majority of young people who leave rural communities never return.

It would be wrong to suggest, of course, that the social idea that talented people can only forge successful lives in the big city is completely devoid of any factual basis. Howley (2009) argues that the social definition of success as requiring a "professional" career may need to be adjusted; however, it is difficult to argue the fact that there are fewer opportunities in rural communities for careers which utilize and reward intellectual ability. Rural areas often display a significant homogeneity in the types of careers which are present within the community, and the majority of these careers are traditional in nature and require little or no higher education (Jacobs, Finken, Griffin, & Wright, 1998). I knew students in Alaska who wanted to be mechanics, fishermen, fashion designers, and lawyers, and it was painfully obvious which ones would have to move away to reach their goals. Individuals who do manage to find professional positions in rural communities may find their skills and education do not bring the same returns they would in an urban area (Artz, 2003).

Cultural Factors

Further challenges for gifted students in rural areas arise from issues of culture - both rural culture specifically and the wider culture's views of rural life and people. Howley (1998, cited in Lawrence, 2009) noted that some cultural values typical of rural communities, such as the importance of family and community and a strong work ethic, are beneficial to education. Others, however, can be detrimental.

Traditionalism and what Lawrence refers to as "fearful dependence on the past" (2009, p 464) can dampen ambitions, particularly for gifted individuals with nontraditional interests. Students interested in career or educational paths that are uncommon in their communities may be discouraged (Lewis & Hafer, 2007). Negative reactions of peers, parents, and community members to young people whose ambitions run counter to prevailing norms can create difficulties for young people not only in making important life choices, but in what Barbara Kent Lawrence (2009) refers to as "the process of trying to form a valued self".

This traditionalism can be amplified by other concerns. Gifted female ruralites who choose to pursue male-dominated career paths, for example, can be subject to a double dose of social disapproval for bucking both gender stereotypes and rural traditionalism (Jacobs, Finken, Griffin, & Wright, 1998). The pressure to conform to traditionalist expectations can cause intense stress when planning one's future. It can also lead to gifted students redirecting their intelligence and creativity toward socially unacceptable and even self-destructive behavior (Sawyer & Delgado, 1995).

There is also a significant cultural component to the "brain drain" phenomenon described earlier. Literature, music, and other popular media continue to provide talented students with the stereotype of the young adult who "escapes" small town life to chase dreams in the big city. High-achieving students also often internalize a desire from within their own communities to see "somebody from a small town make it big" (Carr & Kefalas, 2009, p 37), which can add additional pressure to leave in pursuit of socially-defined career and life success.

The final cultural consideration is that of the common view of rural people and life. Gifted ruralites come from a "subordinate and less valued culture" (Lawrence, 2009, p 468) which serves as a "standard of backwardness" (Howley, 2009, p 537). Rural people are seen as ignorant and unsuited for intellectual pursuits. At one time, it seems, even gifted education professionals felt comfortable describing rural students as "uninformed, lacking in social and learning skills", "provincial", and "[culturally] deprived" (Plowman, 1967, p 4). During my own year at Cornell University, an institution which prides itself on diversity but nonetheless draws half its population from large Eastern cities, I found that many of my peers seemed not to comprehend how a "redneck" who attended a rural public school could have gained entrance to an Ivy League university alongside the prep-school-educated children of urban elites. Lawrence (2009) points out that this negative image of ruralites can easily be internalized as a negative *self*-image, leading to rural students adopting a fatalistic outlook along the lines of "I can't achieve more; I'm just a dumb hick".

Conclusions

As Lewis & Hafer (2007) point out, there can be significant benefits to being educated in a rural community, for gifted and non-gifted students alike. Class sizes are often smaller, community memberships more stable, connections with classmates and teachers stronger, and school and town communities more supportive. However, the potential negative effects on gifted young people of the educational, socioeconomic, and cultural environment of a rural area are many, and it is vital that teachers and parents be aware of them. Serving the needs of gifted students from early education through career and university counselling is as important in rural areas as in urban, and the particularities of growing up as a gifted ruralite must be understood if this goal is to be achieved.

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