

Should Rural Gifted Education Be Different? A Survey of Teacher Educators

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Gifted education is not provided in many rural schools. Some teacher educators believe that one of the reasons for this is that gifted teachers and gifted teacher training programs are oriented to provide education applicable only to urban and suburban settings. This paper presents the results of a survey of representatives of teacher training institutions offering gifted education programs. The group surveyed was derived from the list developed by Parker and Karnes [6]. Each respondent was asked to indicate whether or not differentiation of gifted teacher education for rural gifted teachers was necessary. More than 60% of the respondents believed that differentiation was necessary. All areas surveyed, e.g., teaching methods, program development, guidance counseling, underachievement, identification practices, program administration and evaluation, etc., were candidates for differentiation with the greatest need being in the areas of program development, curriculum development, and identification.

For a number of years, those involved in special education have recognized a need for different instructional and organizational practices for learners who are members of low incidence populations. In rural areas all students who are deviant from the norm by two or more standard deviations, are, because of the small size of the school population, low incidence learners. Special educators have formed networks of practitioners to share ideas and resources. This has led to the establishment of several groups such as American Council of Rural Special Educators and the National Rural and Small Schools Consortium (NRSSC) which are designed to facilitate information exchange. Institutions of higher education and the trainers employed therein have come together to share ideas and practices which are appropriate for the training of rural educators at Rural Education Association and NRSSC conferences.

There have been numerous theoretical papers and position statements on the various needs of rural special educators [3]. Materials have been generated, pursuant to a federal grant, to help institutions of higher education prepare special education teachers for life as educators in rural America [4]. A Rural Education Research consortium has been developed and is generating information about successful rural practices [2].

Little descriptive or experimental work has been done in the area of rural gifted education. A literature search conducted for an ERIC-CRES publication on rural gifted practices [1] failed to unearth any research related to rural teacher training practices in gifted education although some research dealt with the needs of rural teachers [7]. The research described in this paper is a first attempt to remedy this void. As in all exploratory research, the first

attempt should describe the area to be researched as it is rather than to try to manipulate variables which some think are embedded within the field. Therefore we decided to describe topics in gifted education and ask teacher educators who prepare teachers of the gifted to indicate whether or not differentiated instruction would be necessary for those who would serve the gifted in rural settings.

The areas to include in the survey were derived by looking at topics included in texts on gifted education and by listings of certification requirements in states in which teachers of the gifted are certified [5]. The number of items on the survey were intentionally limited so that the survey could be printed on a single sheet. Seven questions were included requiring a total of 22 responses.

SUBJECTS

Participants in the survey were all of the directors of programs in education of the gifted as listed by Parker and Karnes [6] with the exception of the senior author. This list was selected because it had been carefully developed by Parker and Karnes. They had contacted state gifted consultants and asked them to identify all degree granting institutions in the state that offered degrees in gifted education. All of these were then asked to list the other institutions preparing gifted teachers in the state and the lists were cross checked. Teachers of isolated courses related to gifted education were not included because (1) they were not in Parker and Karnes comprehensive and current list, (2) their courses are not designed to *systematically* prepare teachers in a primary role as gifted educators and (3) they are likely to offer their courses only sporadically.

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METHOD

Questionnaires were mailed to 99 program directors of gifted education programs near the end of the spring semester, 1986. A cover letter explained the nature of the research, and possible forums in which the data would be presented. A stamped, self-addressed envelope was included to facilitate responses.

RESULTS

Fifty-three usable questionnaires were returned and two were returned as undeliverable, a response rate of 54%. Of the 53 respondents, 32 (60.4%) agreed that education for teachers of the gifted should be different if the teachers were to work in a rural setting.

Table 1 provides mean responses to each of the topic areas by those who thought education should be different for rural settings ($N=32$).

In addition to responding to the areas in Table 1 respondents were asked to indicate which two areas were the most critical in terms of need for differentiation. Program development was seen as the most critical area, selected by 34.3%; curriculum development selected by 31.2% and identification processes selected by 28.1%. The percentage values for all other areas were less than 16%. A series of demographic questions was also asked: 29.98% of the students of the 53 respondents were placed in rural environments for their first teaching assignment. Teacher trainers in colleges and universities located in communities of less than 100,000 population placed a greater percentage (45%) of their students in rural settings than those in communities of greater than 100,000 (17%), ($F/1, 48/1 = 16.750, p > .05$). There were however no differences by community size between those who

TABLE 1

Areas in Which Education Should Be Different for Rural Gifted Teachers: Means and Standard Deviations

Areas from Questionnaire	Mean*	Standard Deviation
Teaching Practices Elementary	3.13	1.25
Teaching Practices Secondary	3.50	1.36
Program Development Elementary	4.00	1.25
Program Development Secondary	4.07	1.23
Identification Processes	4.03	1.30
Dealing with Special Populations (e.g., creative)	3.80	1.32
Guidance Counseling	4.03	1.30
Program Administration	3.77	1.19
Program Evaluation	3.37	1.50
Teaching Content (e.g., math, science)	3.10	1.47
Curriculum Development	3.67	1.56
Dealing with Underachievers	3.50	1.43

*Scale 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

thought that education for rural gifted teachers should be differentiated and those who did not. Most graduates (48.8%) are found at the master's level, followed closely by those at the undergraduate level (39.5%). The respondents report that on average they teach 44.7 students per year in an introductory course in gifted education. This may be misleading as the standard deviation is quite large ($SD=56.6$) and the median is 23.1. Finally 30 respondents indicated that their state had some form of certification for teachers of the gifted.

In addition to quantitative data, qualitative or anecdotal data were tabulated from comments written on most of the returned surveys. The qualitative data can best be summarized by area as follows: Respondents most interested in program development at the secondary level emphasized the lack of options or alternatives in rural environments thereby making options for enhancing curricular offerings critical.

Those interested in identification indicated that conventional identification systems seem to be generally ineffective for rural students, particularly those who are disadvantaged. Some respondents indicated that rural areas are egalitarian and closed to outsiders so that much of the identification process needs to involve overcoming resistance on the part of the community. Typical identification models seem to favor the high socioeconomic status urban/suburban student and discriminate against the disadvantaged rural student.

In terms of guidance and counseling, rural students differ from urban in career goals, aspirations, beliefs, ethics and family structure. All of these differences lead to a need to provide different kinds and amounts of counseling services. Counseling should lead the student to a culturally appropriate goal.

Respondents choosing program administration as the area of greatest need voiced the same kinds of concerns as those who talked of program development in that the primary emphasis was on resources and means for accessing them. Strategies offered usually related to technology, either video or computer-based. The typical litany was voiced about problems involving transportation, small class size, cultural barrenness. Only a few nontechnological options were suggested such as Advanced Placement classes which meet less frequently than daily.

Respondents who singled out curriculum development as an important issue reiterated the lack of options in offerings and in teacher capability. They stressed the need of using what is available in the community and the need for counseling for both students and their parents.

Some respondents singled out career development as an area of need. Students lack options and have limited exposure. They may come from homes that value family ties more than career success. Therefore teachers need to know how to deal with this. Should they try to change them? This issue needs to be resolved.

These issues and ideas are illustrative of the issues the qualitative data posed. Solutions may not be presently available or may require the imposition of values which are not representative of rural values.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We can conclude from the data that the majority of the teacher trainers who responded to the survey thought that at least some part of the education of rural gifted teachers should be different from that of gifted teachers targeted for urban/suburban careers. However, in that only 53% of the 100 teacher trainers in the original sample are represented in this overall study, the number who see a need for differentiated training for rural teachers represent only one third of the total possible sample.

All of the topic areas surveyed were considered at least somewhat necessary by the average respondent. The highest needs were in the areas of program development (secondary), identification, guidance and counseling and program development (elementary). Areas with the least need for differentiation were elementary teaching practices, teaching of content and program evaluation. With reflection this breakdown seems obvious in that elementary teachers normally provide a lot of differentiation and therefore need less differentiation in their own instruction. Content teaching is based on textbooks and tests which are generic across districts and therefore inherently less amenable to modification, and program evaluation techniques and processes should function across localities. On the other hand, differentiated program development is very difficult to create inexpensively for small numbers of students, who are normally found in rural environments. Evidence is available that rural populations are different from each other and from urban/suburban populations therefore making identification more difficult if textbook procedures are used. Guidance and counseling should be different because the goals and values may be different in rural areas.

When forced to pick two areas as most important the respondents chose somewhat differently from what they did when they could respond to all items. The item selected most frequently by respondents was program development (level unspecified) followed by curriculum development and identification processes.

Generally the data indicate that teachers of the gifted

should be trained differently in almost all areas. The exact nature of this training and the areas need further definition. The initial constraint of asking questions based on certification requirements led to limitations of the questions asked. Other or expanded items should be used in future studies. If more areas had been included a more accurate picture of the actual needs of rural gifted teachers (from the perspective of the trainers) would have been developed. Future research should broaden the number of areas questioned. In the next phase of this research we plan to ask students of the trainers in this study if they have the same perceptions as their mentors. When this has been established then we can begin to assess what practices are, or should be, used by teachers of the gifted in rural America.

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