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Jesse James Syndrome, a Scholarly Review of Serving Gifted Students in Rural Settings

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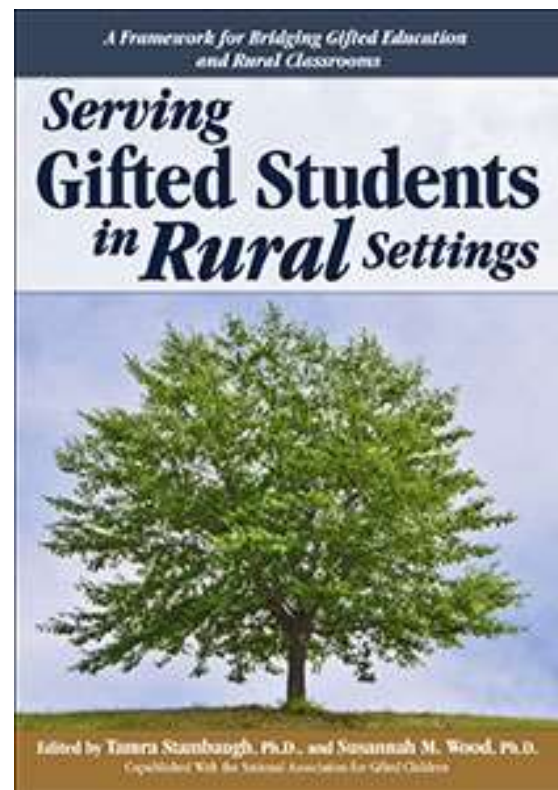
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Jesse James Syndrome

Serving Gifted Students in Rural Settings is a superb set of essays that would help practitioners in rural settings develop or enhance services for gifted students. The authors are specialists in Rural Studies, Counseling, and Gifted Education. Dr. Tamra Stambaugh is an Assistant Research Professor for Special Education and the Executive of Programs for Talented Youth at Vanderbilt University. Dr. Susannah M. Wood is an associate professor at the University of Iowa in the Department of Rehabilitation and Counselor Education. The talent of the two editors created this manual for practitioners that brings much-needed guidance for building and enhancing programs to meet the needs of gifted rural students.

Leadership in rural settings is a challenge. In my own experience as a rural superintendent and principal, my talent needed to be spread across multiple roles within the district, from expertise in curriculum and instruction to not-so-strong expertise for inspecting school bus routes. Teachers are required to have talent in multiple areas as well. Each day they plan and teach multiple



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classes and all types of students, from a special needs child to second language learner, an average learner or a very gifted child. Education should meet the needs of all students, but without layers of support, it is a challenge.

It is exciting to know that the Rural Futures Institute—through a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship—mobilizes the diverse resources of the University of Nebraska System and its partners to support rural communities and regions in building upon their unique strengths and assets to achieve their desired futures. This major rural initiative has a goal to bring hope to rural America and change the trajectory that to be successful you must leave your community. We have a responsibility to help our students flourish where they are. Our attention is focused on students who are falling behind so that we can improve our test scores. By the same time, we allow our gifted students to perform but, we do not maximize what they can do with their ability. In the eyes of a gifted student waiting to be challenged is time stolen from them that could be used to develop their talent.

*“All the time I just sat there...
Waiting for something new to learn!
My teachers should have ridden with
Jesse James...
For all the learning time they have
stolen from me!”*

A 10-year-old boy quoting from
Rommel Rides Deep into Egypt
by Richard Brautigan, American Poet

In schools where the community and place are used as a lens for the curriculum, students, (including gifted students), will be able to find ways to experiment with success. This success is a result of connecting students to local professionals and leaders that can support them through college and at home. For example, some students have found success by working directly as interns or summer

employees in the field that they wish to explore and perhaps pursue in college. By giving these students an opportunity to stretch their learning, they are more deeply engaged and ready to excel in college.

The book is organized in three important sections: Part I. The Rural Life. The Rural Life addresses what it is like to live in a rural setting and the challenges that are faced. Part II. Identification, Curriculum, and Instruction for Rural Gifted Learners addresses how to identify gifted children and offers some unique ways to develop programs and meet the needs of gifted children within the rural setting. Part III. Affecting Change for Gifted Learners in Rural Communities discusses the uniqueness that rural educators face with gifted children and their families. This section also addresses policy development and advocacy, as well as the professional development that is necessary to help teachers develop their own talent to serve rural gifted children.

Part I includes four chapters that help us understand rural life. Zachary Richards and Tamra Stambaugh do an excellent job of laying out what is like to live in a rural setting. “What is Rural?” The word rural means different things to different people. Some identify rural as an idyllic landscape that has the allure to bring tourists to the area. Others see rural as depressed, hollowed out with dilapidated buildings and abject poverty. The discussion of the essence of rural lays out an understanding of a sense of place, the value of tradition, the role of the family, the role of religion, commercialism and definitions of success. These aspects are truly the essence of rural. A strong sense of place is often tied to the land. In one study, 93% of rural students had a strong sense of family and living close was important to them. At the same time, of these same students, 76% said that leaving home was important. While these desires were in conflict, one answer that the authors brought forward was professional mentorship with adults in the community and life skills that help students improve their financial wellbeing as well as

other life skills such as communication and conflict resolution.

One example of this type of mentorship is part of the University of Nebraska Rural Futures Institute. Undergraduate students are engaged with mentors in rural communities doing everything from historical research to business planning and marketing. They are learning marketable skills while providing leadership and service in communities that sorely need them. The authors also outlined some of the damaging impact of national overemphasis on commercialism and national policies related to schooling. Corporate concerns have proven devastating to rural communities with the loss of traditional values associated with a rural way of life. Rural out-migration is a consequence of bright students leaving home for education and better employment opportunities. The population at home is left without qualified professionals to support the community, including teachers, physicians and other healthcare professionals, law enforcement, and others. Belief systems and geographic isolation may also be obstacles for rural students, especially gifted students, to gain success in enriching activities such as zoos, museums, and libraries. Gifted students tend to skate through high school with a wake-up call when they arrive at college.

“Leaving or Staying Home, Belief Systems and Paradigms” considers three important standpoints on rural giftedness. Craig Howley, Aimee Howley, and Daniel Showalter begin by describing the standpoint as a way of reading the world based upon a place in it. Rural is best understood when it is related to the land, to family, to work and to local communities. These meanings help rural educators support, encourage, and actively facilitate rural adulthoods for rural students. Unfortunately, the view of most rural children and the adults in their life is that they should abandon their homes for metropolitan areas for the most opportunities. These positions are often encouraged by educators within their schools. Science, Technology, Engineering, and

Mathematics (STEM) is an economic powerhouse that is virtually limited to urban and metropolitan areas. In the author’s own research, it was discovered that the majority of rural high school math teachers offer almost no opportunities for the application of “advanced” math skills. (Howley, Howley & Yahn, 2014) One of the most powerful thoughts that the authors share is the dominant view of money as a measure of a happy or good life. Finally, the authors suggest that we “turn off the noise” that presents rural in a negative light. They recommend the following for working with gifted students:

1. Develop talent, not greed
2. Recognize talent as connecting to higher purposes than can be addressed elsewhere.
3. Encourage rural gifted students to realize that their talents are more of a responsibility than a gift.

In “Education in Rural America Challenges and Opportunities,” Marybeth J. Mattingly and Andrew Shaefer address different challenges faced by rural people compared to those living in metropolitan and urban areas. They emphasize the critical need for education policy to be different and specially focused on uniqueness, realizing that “one size, does not fit all.” The authors discuss the barriers to success and the implications these barriers have for policy development. Donna Y. Ford reminds us that little research exists about gifted black and Hispanic students in rural settings. Urban and rural minority students’ face the challenges of poverty and many other similar challenges. She emphasizes the need for culturally responsible teaching and responds by laying out pedagogy recommendations for each culture. The authors emphasize the dire need for additional scholarship in this area along with the need for professional development to help teachers become more culturally responsive in the teaching of gifted learners.

The final section helps us recognize the unique challenges that exist in rural schools

for working with gifted learners. The classroom teacher or gifted educator will especially appreciate this section as it provides the detail needed to create and carry out a well-researched gifted program. Most importantly, the authors specifically address what is needed and what would not be appropriate in developing a rural gifted program. Stambaugh begins with her chapter “Celebrating Talent,” which helps us understand rural giftedness and how it is a completely different set of values and beliefs than similar programs in metropolitan and urban locations. The context of place is critically important in the identification process. Seward and Gentry help us manage the unique rural experience by reiterating the need to understand and celebrate place and champion personalized education and the many strategies for grouping to meet the needs of rural gifted students. They emphasize the importance of a continuum of service for K-12 to provide continuous development of the gifted learner.

Assouline, Flanary, and Foley-Nicpon begin with a discussion about the history of rural gifted education. They emphasize the importance of a rigorous high school curriculum and accelerating students through advanced placement (AP), dual enrollment and online learning as part of the programming needed for gifted students. In “Serving the Rural Gifted Child through Advanced Curriculum,” Joyce VanTassel-Baska and Gail Fischer Hubbard discuss interventions at the school and community level and at the classroom level from extended learning time to academic-year specialized programs (residential programs) mentorships, internships, and tutorials to expose students to professionals in various fields. The strategies that matter for classrooms include acceleration, structure and scaffolding, independent learning, using higher order questions and role models.

Joan D. Lewis reviewed models and applications of programs for gifted rural children in her chapter, “Programming and Rural Gifted Learners, a Review of Models and Applications.” Joan’s comprehensive review of

the models and applications available provides the reader with clear ideas of what might work in each unique school setting. She begins with a discussion and a table that compares the characteristics of rural schools that fit most settings and suggests criteria for programming models. In the next section, she reviews models and their suitability for specific criteria such as: Can the model be implemented without the availability of high-speed Internet for resources? Or can the model be implemented without a gifted specialist onsite? Finally, she addresses the common use of Response to Intervention (RTI) and how it can easily coincide with gifted programming. For the rural educator, this collection of gifted programs, each analyzed for their efficacy in rural places, is a very helpful resource.

Brian Housand and Angela Housand share the hope that technology could bring to rural America and certainly our gifted students. Rural students want the best of both worlds being near family, but at the same time, they want to pursue higher education and find high paying jobs. Technology can stop the bleeding in rural America and absolutely must be embraced. A priority for rural schools must be very strong broadband. There can be no excuses for poor coverage in rural remote areas. Accessibility for rural students and particularly rural gifted students is necessary for them to access AP courses outside of their district. Many resources available for schools include such things as MOOC’s or Massive Open Online Courses, TED talks, Khan Academy and many others are among the infinite choices online. The authors propose:

As educators, we must give gifted rural students and all students, really—the opportunity to define and participate on their terms using the tools to which they are accustomed. By so doing, we give them the freedom to enact change and with a love of place, change for the better. Developing talent in gifted learning must also be widely encompassing. It is important to receive support not only from K-12 and extracurricular programs but teachers, mentors,

and coaches. Talent development is also needed to come from supplemental, out of school programming for gifted children and for society to support them.

Co-Editor Susannah M. Wood and Erin Lane contributed a chapter that specifically addresses counseling the rural gifted student. Being a gifted student in a rural area has its own set of challenges. School counselors can have a substantial impact on the life of a gifted student from challenging them into Advanced Placement courses, to helping them with career planning. At the same time, parental involvement is also critical to serving gifted children. Dana Griffiths' and Co-Editor Woods', "Mommy I'm bored" School-Family-Community Approaches to working with gifted, rural, African American males demonstrates how school-family and community can certainly have an impact on the success of working with gifted African-American males in rural areas. African American males are disproportionately at high risk for academic failure. This chapter is told through the eyes of an African-American parent of a son, author Dana Griffiths, who champions parental identification and advocacy for gifted students. "Parents must be 'talent identifiers' and play a pivotal role in a child's talent development" (Griffiths, 2015). The chapter highlights the three major paradigms (Ford, 2010) that lead to underrepresentation of African American and Latino males in gifted education: 1) Deficit thinking that culturally different students are genetically inferior; 2) Colorblindness or suppressing the role of culture in learning, curriculum, assessment and expectations; and 3) White privilege: unearned benefits that advance Whites while systematically disadvantaging others. Researchers and scholars attribute this thinking to the underrepresentation of culturally different students in gifted programs (Ford, 2010; Gorski, 2011; Henfield, 2013).

Elissa F. Brown's chapter outlines policy needs that will address the unique challenges of rural gifted students. She emphasizes the importance of the educators' specific skills from the highly qualified teacher to the rural school administrator who understands rural schools and communities. The final chapter speaks to the importance of professional development for gifted teachers. A gifted teacher in a rural school is not just a gifted teacher. Because of financial constraints, the gifted teacher will serve only a small portion of her contract with gifted students and the remaining portion in some other area. Rural schools can be a catalyst for talent development. This opportunity comes from a strong sense of belonging, social cohesiveness, strong relationships between teachers and parents and high levels of school-community interactions. She continues with programming suggestions and highlights the need for professional development.

This edited volume offers practitioners an understanding of rural America, rural schools, and rural gifted learners. The hope of rural educators, like myself, is to draw our brightest and best back home. While they are drawn to metropolitan areas because of the conveniences and pulled into the trap of consumerism, they may be drawn back home when they mature. Our judgment is systematically biased (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009). We hope that a small "nudge" that causes our young gifted students to move home to provide much-needed leadership will happen. Wanting the experiences that they had growing up for their own children may be that small nudge that makes a difference.

Our gifted students shouldn't have to wait for something to learn. Teachers should be not allowed to steal learning time as if they had ridden with Jesse James. These students are our future and deserve to develop their talent.

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