

PRINCIPAL PERCEPTIONS OF GIFTED EDUCATION PROGRAM SERVICE DELIVERY
IN RURAL HIGH SCHOOL SETTINGS

A Record of Study

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the perceptions of (a) program design and delivery, (b) professional development opportunities for teachers and leaders, and (c) the inclusion and support of campus leadership among campus principals of gifted programs in small, rural public high school settings within a region of a Southwestern state that include large numbers of such school settings. A purposive sample of rural high school campus principals were surveyed and interviewed in order to explore their perceptions with regards to the gifted education program on their respective campuses.

Results from this study indicated that participants held an overall sense of dissatisfaction with gifted education programs on their rural high school campuses when considering program design and delivery. Principals reported limited professional development opportunities and variability in program support, citing time and money as barriers to effective program implementation. Thus, the results of the study support previous research indicating great variability in programming in rural schools. Further research is needed in order to determine if similar findings can be extended on a larger scale with regards to geographic location and participant pool.

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Contributors

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

The Texas State Plan for the Education of Gifted/Talented Students (Texas Education Agency, 2019), established a framework for gifted education and established accountability measures for each component of gifted programming. This document provided guidance to Texas school districts to ensure that every student had the opportunity to be appropriately assessed for advanced level curriculum and services within the public school system. State policies have created a system of accountability for ensuring the services of gifted learners; however, it is important to note that specific programmatic delivery decisions are largely left to local decision, resulting in a wide disparity in the availability of gifted programs when considering specific locale and educational resources (Kettler, Russell, & Puryear, 2015).

It is important that individualized student learning needs are recognized and accounted for within educational practices for each student, regardless of locale or size of the school district. Lewis (2000) indicated that gifted students require special education services in order to develop their full potential. Continuous school reform efforts and additional mandated regulations in public education can leave gifted education programs and practices struggling to survive in the educational context without consistent and intentional leadership directing the path (Long, Barnett, &

Rogers, 2015). Furthermore, students specifically located within rural settings are faced with even more challenges as they are less likely to be identified as gifted, and ultimately are offered fewer educational services designed to meet their individual needs (Lawrence, 2009). Similarly, in rural settings, resources are oftentimes limited and specialized teachers may be unavailable altogether or shared within the district, stretching available resources to the limits in order to serve student needs (Howley, Rhodes, & Beall, 2009).

Problem and Significance of Study

Education in rural settings, especially for gifted learners, presents a unique challenge. In fact, Lawrence (2009) stated, “the issues underlying the education of gifted children in rural places are problematic and complex” (p. 462). While it is important to nurture the gifted learner and ensure the educational needs of each student are met, it is also important to recognize and understand the implications within the rural setting and to develop an understanding of the challenges faced within rural schools. According to Howley, Rhodes, and Beall (2009), these challenges include a declining population, persistent poverty, changing demographics, and continued accountability requirements. There is a significant effort in rural communities to nurture their own as they support gifted programming as this effort “seems critical to the sustainability of rural communities” (Lawrence, 2009, p. 488). By sustaining these efforts and ensuring that gifted learners are provided opportunities to further their own learning through adequate programming options, the hope is that these students will return to the

community and be a contributing force throughout the future (Howley, Rhodes, & Beall, 2009). Thus, building a solid framework and program design for gifted education is crucial. Sound design in curriculum which links general principles and course content to gifted characteristics will provide that framework on which gifted learners will be able to advance their own understanding and academic growth (VanTassel-Baska, 2005).

In rural high school settings, gifted students are often served in the regular classroom largely through differentiation, but many also support gifted programs including distance learning, Advanced Placement, dual enrollment programs, and early college high school programs (Howley, Rhodes, & Beall, 2009). However, it is important to note that levels of funding and dedicated resources for these opportunities, as well as geographic availability, lead to varied access creating discrepancies in program accessibility for gifted learners, specifically in the State of Texas (Baker, 2001). Thus, according to Kettler, Russell, and Puryear (2015), rural schools are more likely to present with inadequately supported program options for gifted learners.

It is important to understand the nature of rural school districts in order to design the most effective gifted program to meet the needs of every student. Azano, Callahan, Missett, and Brunner (2014) identified specific challenges faced by rural school districts to include program options and opportunities, mixed-age and mixed-ability classes, limited resources for teachers and students, and time constraints and teacher caseloads. Furthermore, it should be noted that rural school districts in Texas spend less money per pupil in gifted programs, and similarly, fewer staff members and teachers are allocated

to gifted programs (Kettler, Russell, & Puryear, 2015). Oftentimes, one teacher serves the entire district, or travels between districts to serve gifted students on each campus. This travel, depending on geographic locale, can drain available time in the classroom. As a result, there is a lack of fidelity in the implementation of the gifted program and curriculum in terms of daily practice.

According to the Texas Education Agency website (www.tea.state.tx.us), in 2019-2020, there were 466 rural school districts and 934 rural schools throughout the State of Texas. Rural school districts are defined as having a growth rates less than 20% with an enrollment between 300 and the state median of 897, or less than 300. These schools comprise a total population of 183,358 students, and 5.9% of those students are identified as gifted. While much research has been conducted on gifted education in rural schools, less has been done given the same subject within the boundaries of the State of Texas. However, minimal research has been conducted specifically at the secondary level in consideration of gifted education in rural settings across the State of Texas. Due to the scarcity of the existing research of gifted education in rural high school settings, there is a pressing need for further efforts in this area in order to ensure that the needs of every gifted student is met regardless of locale.

Through the implementation of solid and systemic approaches to educational programming for gifted students, especially as it relates to small, rural high school settings, the academic needs of every student becomes the center of all processes. By understanding both the challenges faced in rural school districts and the needs of gifted

learners within these settings, a balance can be found to benefit the gifted student. It is through sound design and a solid framework then that gifted learners can participate in a meaningful way in their own learning so that they realize the greatest benefit in the educational outcomes.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my study was to investigate the perceptions of (a) program design and delivery, (b) professional development opportunities for teachers and leaders, and (c) the inclusion and support of campus leadership among campus principals of gifted programs in small, rural public high school settings within a region of a Southwestern state that include large numbers of such school settings.

Definition of Terms

The following terms were used in the development of this record of study. The terms are relevant to understanding the research as well as the findings.

Acceleration

Texas Education Agency (2009) defines acceleration as a “strategy of mastering knowledge and skills at a rate faster or ages younger than the norm” (p. 23).

Advanced Placement

Offered by Collegeboard, Advanced Placement courses may be taken at the high school level, and upon fulfillment of testing requirements, students may obtain college credit as determined by college officials.

Differentiation

Differentiation is defined as the “modification of curriculum and instruction according to content, pacing, and/or product to meet unique student needs” (Texas Education Agency, 2009, p. 24).

Dual Credit Courses

Dual credit courses are taken at the high school level and enable students to obtain high school and college credit concurrently.

Eduhero

Eduhero is an online learning platform utilized by school districts for professional development. It provides a self-paced, interactive format for professional learning courses.

Gifted Student

A gifted student is a student who displays the potential for a high level of accomplishment and achievement as compared to peers. A gifted student may exhibit strengths in creativity, leadership, or specific academic content area (Texas Education Agency, 2019).

Identification of Giftedness

The identification of giftedness is an assessment process through which students have an opportunity to demonstrate specific academic abilities and talents so that a determination whether or not a student will benefit from gifted services (Texas Education Agency, 2019).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that provides a guide for this study is Learning Centered Leadership which asserts that leadership is essential in providing quality educational programs and ultimately, the quality of education within the school system as a whole (Murphy et al., 2006). School leadership is a process that involves not only influence, but also purpose as well. According to Murphy, Elliot, Goldring, and Porter (2006), leadership is a result of prior experiences and personal belief systems that influence the leadership behaviors that in turn, influence the outcomes (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Learning Centered Leadership Framework. Adapted from Murphy, J. E., Elliott, S. N., Goldring, E., & Porter, A. C. (2006). *Learning-centered leadership: A conceptual foundation.* Vanderbilt University. (p. 5).



Leadership behaviors impact campus culture, classroom instructional practices, curriculum management, campus accountability and other external factors. In turn, these behaviors are in direct correlation with student success. Thus, the leadership of a campus principal is rooted in their own knowledge, experience, and belief systems with regards to gifted education. Subsequently, the behaviors exhibited by the leader impact initiatives that occur on campus including the programmatic approach to gifted education as well as the support level for professional development and instructional arrangements. Thus, the leadership of the principal of a rural high school setting is critical to the development and implementation of a gifted education program that is able to meet the needs of gifted high school students.

In considering Learning Centered Leadership, there are 8 dimensions that include multiple tenets. According to Murphy, Elliot, Goldring, and Porter (2006), these include: vision for learning, instructional program, curricular program, assessment program, communities of learning, resource acquisition and use, organizational culture, and social advocacy (Table 1).

Table 1

Dimensions of Learning Centered Leadership. Adapted from Murphy, J. E., Elliott, S. N., Goldring, E., & Porter, A. C. (2006). *Learning-centered leadership: A conceptual foundation.* Vanderbilt University. (p. 7).

Vision for Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Development• Articulation• Implementation• Stewardship
Instructional Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Knowledge base/involvement• Hiring/staff allocation• Supporting staff• Instructional time
Curricular Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Knowledge base/involvement• Expectations• Curriculum alignment process
Assessment Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Knowledge base/ involvement• Assessment procedures• Alignment of instruction and curriculum• Data driven communications
Communities of Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Professional development• Communities of practice• Community partnerships
Resource Acquisition and Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Acquiring resources• Allocating resources
Organizational Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Accountability• Learning environment• Continuous improvement
Social Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stakeholder engagement• Diversity• Local environment• Ethical practices

It is through these dimensions that leaders are able to transform educational systems to provide for increased student achievement and desirable educational outcomes. In fact, “leaders have a good deal to say about how well schools work for America’s youth and their families” (Murphy et al. 2006, p. 31).

Research Questions

The research questions for my study, specifically related to rural public high schools located within a specific region with large numbers of rural school districts in a Southwestern state, were as follows:

1. What are the campus principal’s perceptions of the delivery mode and design for gifted education programs and the effectiveness of the program in meeting the diverse needs of gifted learners on their rural public high school campus?

2. How do the perceptions of the campus leader correlate with professional development opportunities available to and attended by teachers of gifted students in rural public high schools?

3. In what ways are campus leaders of rural public high schools involved in the gifted education program and related professional development opportunities, and how do they work to support program efforts on the campus?

Limitations

Given the wide geographic coverage of the targeted region that includes a large number of rural school districts in a Southwestern state, there was potential for diversity amongst the rural public school districts included within this study. The availability of

resources available to gifted students across the region may not have been consistent due to the physical location of the districts and the proximity to larger, more urban locales.

Delimitations

This study included 23 rural public high schools located within a specific region with large numbers of rural school districts in a Southwestern state. Thus, the findings may not be similar to those seen in larger school districts or districts in other locations. The size determination was made according to guidelines established by the state agency for school districts. Within each district, only campus administrators were included in the study.

Since the focus is only on gifted education at the high school level, administrators of elementary gifted students were not considered. Similarly, programming designs of elementary and middle school campuses were not studied.

Assumptions

This study is based on the assumption that students who have been identified as gifted are indeed being serviced through gifted programming on the rural public high school campus. Also, the assumption was maintained that participants will be forthcoming and honest about the current state of program information as well as personal perceptions.

Organization of the Study

This Record of Study is organized within five chapters. The first chapter includes background information as well as a statement of the purpose of the study.

Additionally, it includes research questions, limitations, delimitations, and assumptions of the study. The second chapter consists of a review of existing literature. Chapter three consists of a description of methodology that will be utilized throughout the study including data sources, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter four includes a discussion of the findings of the study. Lastly, chapter five is comprised of a summary that includes implications for school leaders as well as recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The goal of this chapter is to provide a context for this study as it relates to gifted learners as well as teachers and principals in gifted programs at the rural high school level. The nature and needs of the gifted learner will be addressed as it relates to academic preferences and tendencies of the students. In addition, program designs through various grouping strategies and curriculum delivery used in schools across the nation are explored considering both positive and negative aspects. The professional development needs of gifted teachers in rural settings are also discussed as it relates to instruction within gifted programs. Lastly, characteristics of rural school principals and their instructional leadership capacity are presented to explore the background and situational reality that will ultimately form the basis for the perceptions formed by rural principals throughout this study.

Needs of the Learner

The progression of educational reform for gifted students began in response to a growing perception of underachievement amongst gifted students in America (Yeung, 2014). The basis for the change process in education must be extended to that of gifted education as well, thus it is important to understand the role that the gifted learner plays in the classroom. Gifted learners require consistent challenge on an ongoing basis to

make academic progress. Additionally, “gifted learners are significantly more likely to prefer independent study, independent project, and self-instructional materials” (Rogers, 2007, p. 385). This enables the students to monitor their own progress and learning, a motivating factor in the nature of the gifted learner. This behavior is indicative of the nature of the gifted learner and provides for quick transference to other areas of curriculum and learning (Rogers, 2007).

In the delivery of instruction to the gifted learner, pacing must be an important consideration. In order for retention at the highest level, it is important that gifted students are instructed at their own learning rates rather than a slower pace often found in a regular classroom. The learner must feel that progress is being made in educational pursuits. The faster pacing and generalized approach to instruction coupled with the elimination of repetitive review and practice drills provide an environment most conducive for gifted learners to make gains in their educational context (Rogers, 2007). Since this type of instruction is not seen in most regular classrooms, there are crucial implications in the understanding of the varied needs and nature of the gifted learner.

A shift in focus is required in understanding the giftedness with regards to the identification and labeling of such. A one-size fits all approach to the identification process implies that giftedness is a birthright of sorts and makes no allowance for the idea that such giftedness can be further developed through education and appropriate programming. The ideals of giftedness are too often based on test scores rather than the characteristics of the learner, leading to the perception that giftedness is an absolute

condition with no room for movement. This strict definition of gifted and belief system has brought with it a misconception and skepticism about gifted education programs and how they can serve the needs of gifted learners differently than regular students (Renzulli & Reis, 1991). Thus, it is important to focus more attention to the idea of talent development in gifted programs as a means to open the door to a more beneficial potential through the appropriate service of this population. In turn, implementation of the gifted program should respond as programs are structured to nurture the learner and provide flexibility within the programming to allow for the diversity of each learner as an individual.

Through an intentional focus on talent development, a student-centered approach to daily ways operating within the educational setting provides a pathway to extend the appropriate education to both gifted students as well as potentially gifted students. Furthermore, by restructuring programs as well as known concepts to include the development of talent rather than simply absolute giftedness, student limitations are lifted as students are able to demonstrate their own abilities and insights thus revealing potential areas of giftedness that may not have been visible otherwise (Schack, 1996). Renzulli and Reis (1991) made this point regarding the development of potential by their comparison of the gifted learner with a world class athlete by saying,

You don't prepare a young man or woman to become a world class athlete by keeping him or her in regular gym classes and by not allowing him or her to

compete against other youngsters who can provide appropriate levels of challenge. (p. 34)

Similarly, bright students should be placed into learning environments conducive to their learning styles, desire for academic challenge, and appropriate educational support so that they can mutually benefit from the educational programming and reach their own learning potentials.

When specifically considering secondary students and the needs of adolescent gifted learners, there are key considerations. First, cognitively, secondary students require a wide variety of options and opportunities. These include rigor in coursework, mentorships, laboratory studies, as well as library time for individual projects and research to fully develop talent areas (Dixon, 2018). Additionally, there should be a programmatic focus on pathways dedicated to strong academic and relevant options that are geared towards students who are more advanced than their peers or have already mastered the content at the prescribed grade level (Peters et al., 2014).

However, in addition to cognitive needs, the adolescent gifted learner must learn self-regulation skills as they learn to navigate more complex curriculum and course schedules. They need to “develop ways to foster strengths and compensate for weaknesses” (Dixon, 2018, p. 237). It is not uncommon for these students to display perfectionism, anxiety, and underachievement as well. Thus, career and personal counseling may be potential areas to consider when developing a cohesive educational program for these learners.

Program Design and Delivery

Considering the administration of a gifted program, there are several designs that are used in schools across the nation. These designs include diverse grouping methods as well as inclusive programs that promote individualized instruction and differentiation. Group instructional arrangements can be heterogeneous or homogeneous. However, there are multiple strategies within each instructional arrangement such as cooperative learning, within class grouping, and pull-out programs that are used to serve gifted students in the educational setting. Each of the program designs and delivery methods aims to meet the individual and diverse needs of the gifted learner.

Heterogeneous Grouping

In classrooms across the country, heterogeneous grouping is prevalent across grade levels as it provides an equal opportunity for learners of all types the same access to educational opportunities. In these class arrangements there is a multitude of variances amongst the students and their educational needs. Therefore, the question of equality becomes very important in assessing this practice of student grouping. In their discussion of group effectiveness in educational contexts, Renzulli and Reis (1991) stated, “the major criteria for group effectiveness are commonality of purpose, mutual respect and harmony, group and individual progress toward goals, and individual enjoyment and satisfaction” (p. 31). Thus, it is important to consider the ramifications of heterogeneous grouping of the gifted learners with regards to the educational benefits of the learner. The commonality and opportunity for academic progress must be

considered in evaluating the effective use of heterogeneous grouping where gifted learners are included. The inclusion of multiple backgrounds and personal experiences can be important for the enrichment and achievement of all students in the classroom (Huss, 2006). However, Dixon (2018, p. 239) states, “It is important to remember that secondary gifted adolescents are not a homogeneous group. They have different talents and different learning characteristics that may require special consideration.” Therefore, while this grouping strategy may provide social benefits, care must be taken to maintain the level of rigor most appropriate to every learner.

Within the confines of the heterogeneous grouping of a typical classroom, cooperative learning is heralded as an effective learning strategy for most student learners. Not only does this practice lend itself to greater opportunities with the curriculum, it opens up a working relationship with others as well. However, it is important to consider the gifted learner within this arrangement as they are typically left with meaningless tasks or feel responsible for doing the majority of the work. This is due essentially to the lack of individual accountability on the efforts of group members. While cooperative learning can be effective with this population of students, it is important to create group interdependence and create opportunities for open-ended tasks from which all students, including the gifted, may reap benefit (Huss, 2006). Oftentimes in the secondary setting, gifted learners are defined as tutor and help assist the teacher with classroom instruction; however this is not an optimal arrangement to develop talent or make academic progress for the high-level student.

Within Class Grouping

The use of within class grouping is one way in which teachers have been able to bridge the gap between students of varied levels of learning. VanTassel-Baska (2005) clearly stated, “The use of within-class grouping is nonnegotiable for serving gifted learners at all levels of schooling” (p. 93) as she considers the heterogeneous grouping systems which typically provide little if any differentiation to address individual student needs in the regular classroom. The use of within class grouping provides for more differentiation and is certainly better than no grouping at all within a classroom in order to meet the needs of the gifted learner. However, materials and tasks must be differentiated in order to appropriately provide for the variances in learners level of readiness so that effective instruction can take place in the classroom (Rogers, 2007). While varied grouping methods may benefit the diverse population of learners, within class grouping, when used appropriately through accurate and appropriate differentiation has been found to have substantial positive impact on academic outcomes for the gifted learner while at the same time eliminating the elitist practices of separating students from their regular education classrooms (Holloway, 2003). Thus, when considering the program design it is important to note the group benefits and effective practice within each in order to maximize the benefit to the gifted learner.

Homogeneous Grouping

“The strongest body of research evidence supports the use of advanced curricula in core areas of learning at an accelerated rate for high-ability learners (VanTassel-Baska

& Brown, 2007, p. 351.) This statement leads to the homogeneous grouping of students, in particular consideration for the gifted learner. The homogeneous grouping affords the learners the ability to interact with peers with similar interests and ability levels. The gifted learner needs the opportunity provided within this specialized group setting in order to advance at a rate consistent with their ability level and potential in the academic setting (VanTassel-Baska, 2005). These specialized class groups have been heavily utilized in the delivery of gifted programs especially at the secondary level where curriculum tends to be most departmentalized, and has been found to be “one of the primary ways to deliver differentiated curriculum” (VanTassel-Baska, 2005, p. 93). This group setting provides a framework in which the teacher is able to consider the characteristics of the learners based on commonality of approaches and readiness levels in order to deliver instruction. Significant positive academic effects for gifted students are seen through the use of homogeneous grouping in some format (Rogers, 2002). This leads to accelerated learning with specially trained teachers who are able to expand the breadth and depth of the curriculum in their lesson planning in order to meet the needs of the gifted learners (Holloway, 2003).

In the secondary setting, homogeneous grouping is used through the implementation of AP classes, Honors programs, and dual credit enrollment options. Although these programs are not exclusive to gifted students, the entrance criteria is significantly more limited lending itself to the formation of a more homogeneous setting. AP programs are a leading option used in the delivery of services to gifted students in

the high school setting (Callahan, et al., 2013). Similarly, honors programs are also highly implemented for the service and delivery of gifted education programs. Honors courses provide a variety of experiences to gifted learners in multiple content areas and may provide flexibility in delivery mode. Finn and Wright (2015) suggest that online and/or blended learning options may be used with high school students as they are better suited for independent learning as a general practice. In addition to AP and Honors programs, dual enrollment programs in partnership with area colleges and universities offer the opportunity to extend learning in a more structured homogeneous setting for gifted students (Dixon, 2018). These courses provide college credit and may be delivered in multiple setting.

Most often used in elementary schools, pull-out programs offer a type of homogeneous grouping in which the needs of gifted learners can be addressed on an ongoing timeline. In a pull-out program, instruction is typically geared toward an enrichment or independent study model. While the pull-out program can enhance learning, the program as a whole does not respond to student needs for enrichment ongoing throughout the school day. Thus, it is important to note that even when pull-out programs are available in the schools, “it is likely that most of these learners will still spend the bulk of their school careers in regular classrooms” (Tomlinson et al., 2003, p. 120) as most pull-outs are short spans of time throughout the educational day or even week. In addition, classroom teachers tend to consider the pull-out as the sole source of gifted education and become lax within their own role of providing challenging activities

for the gifted learners (Brulles & Winebrenner, 2011). There is no established standard for the operation of pull-out programs across school settings thus the implications of pull-out programs for gifted learners cannot be generalized leading to the mixed responses found in the research.

With specific consideration for secondary students, these programs may be structured to provide concentrated time for independent work as well as collaboration with mentors and community partners. Similarly, the pull-out program arrangement supports secondary makerspace learning as well which “fosters growth in a number of areas” (Dixon, 2018, p, 242). Thus, the combination of community mentorship to support students in their drive for completion of independent learning projects and extended learning opportunities are viable programmatic options for secondary gifted students in a pull-out setting.

Differentiation

As progress has been made in the education of gifted learners, differentiation has become a key component of the process. While the idea of differentiation is certainly a step in the right direction in terms of meeting the individual needs of students, it has also been quite problematic in the understanding of exactly what is meant by differentiation, a question that has consistently been unanswered by those in the field of gifted education (VanTassel-Baska & Brown, 2007). Thus, it is important to define differentiation and a differentiated curriculum to fully understand how it is related to educational practices for successful implementation of classroom strategies. Differentiation as a pedagogical

concept is best defined as an approach through which teachers proactively seek to modify curriculum, teaching methods, and classroom activities to address the diverse needs of the students so that academic potential is maximized (Tomlinson et al., 2003). VanTassel-Baska (2005) further defines a differentiated curriculum specifically as follows:

A differentiated curriculum is one that is tailored to the needs of groups of gifted learners or individual students, and provides experiences, sufficiently different from the norm to justify specialized intervention, delivered by a trained educator of gifted learners using appropriate instructional and assessment processes to optimize learning. (p. 93)

Thus, a differentiated curriculum for gifted learners should provide a linkage to content and subject matter to gifted characteristics of learning in order to provide the most meaningful experiences in the educational setting. While most often stressed at the elementary level, differentiation is also important in the service of secondary gifted students as well when specific and targeted AP or Honors-level courses are not available.

One problem with differentiated curriculum is the lack of training and knowledge with regards to how it should be developed and implemented. Many teachers provide students with what could be construed as more work, unimportant and meaningless to the desired outcomes, leading to more frustration on the part of the gifted learner. Once they are successful, they will continue to receive more of the same kind of work in the

classroom and by keeping these students in a regular classroom with little to no meaningful differentiation defeats the entire purpose of a gifted education program (Renzulli & Reis, 1991).

A second concern with differentiation and its implementation “lies in the lack of fidelity of implementation” (VanTassel-Baska & Brown, 2007, p. 353). Teachers continue to employ a wide array of educational strategies within the classroom, a toolbox approach as such. With this approach however, deep and careful consideration is not truly afforded to the actual curriculum and as a result, differentiation is sporadic in its implementation. In fact, Van Tassel-Baska, Quek, and Feng (2007) indicated that multiple studies show that very few differentiation strategies are actually being utilized in the regular classroom. Teachers must be proactive in their selection of methods and strategies, and although this mind shift will take time, it is crucial for the effective implementation of a differentiated curriculum.

For differentiation to be effective, it must be considered and revered as best practice in the educational setting for all grade levels, from elementary to secondary. Best practice ensures that differentiation is proactive, employs flexibility in student grouping, varies instructional materials for each learner, varies pacing for each learner, is centered on knowledge, and is student learner-centered (Tomlinson, et al., 2003). In a differentiated classroom, students can link knowledge to experiences and learning to build connections to maximize potential. Sound design in curriculum which links general principles and course content to gifted characteristics will provide a solid

framework on which gifted learners can advance their own understanding and academic growth (VanTassel-Baska, 2005). It is through that sound design and solid framework then that gifted learners can participate in a meaningful way in their own learning so that they realize the greatest benefit in their educational outcomes.

Professional Development and Training

The role of today's teacher is ever changing and requires a commitment to continual learning on the part of the teacher as a professional. Van-Tassel Baska (2005) identified critical requirements for successful high-quality teachers of gifted learners as the desire to be life-long learners as well as the tendency to be a passionate and thoughtful learner. Dixon (2018), states, "The most effective teachers of secondary gifted learners are experts in their content areas; optimally, they are licensed in gifted education. However, this is a rarity." Educating the gifted learner requires a core body of knowledge about the nature and needs of this population of students. While teachers attend a multitude of professional development seminars, training on the gifted learner is overlooked, oftentimes creating a barrier to successful implementation of an effective gifted program. It is important to understand as well that content knowledge and expertise alone, while conducive to building an effective classroom for gifted learners, does not equate with successful implementation of gifted educational practices as most have not been prepared to meet the specific needs of the gifted learner (Rakow, 2012). Thus, a climate of encouragement towards professional growth and teaming and the

approaches within are essential functions of professional development and leadership decisions.

Through the creation of a collaborative working environment that pairs a gifted teacher or specialist with a regular education teacher, a unique inclusive setting is developed so that all students are nurtured in their educational pursuits and given equal benefit of the teaching and learning context. The use of a gifted education teacher as a mentor in professional development provides a key framework valuable to the overall gifted programs. These mentors can step into the classroom and assist as needed and become involved in the learning as they assist the teacher in the appropriate structuring of the class environment. They are able to model and design the curriculum and activities that further serve to address teacher proficiency and achieve the desired learning outcomes for the learner as well (Rakow, 2012).

The basic knowledge of the needs of the gifted learners is certainly important for appropriate instruction; however, it is only a small piece. This knowledge must translate into action within the classroom as well. When educators realize barriers to instruction and in turn, put relevant strategies into action, gifted learners can show growth. Van-Tassel Baska and Stambaugh (2005) stated that it was only when teachers “acknowledge, embrace, and act on student differences, will gifted students be properly served” (p. 216). This task, although simple as it may sound, is more difficult at the outset and teachers must be taught how to accomplish these things within their own contexts. This requires a reflective practice and one that requires motivation and

dedication on the part of the teacher. Teachers of the gifted need to be life-long learners and open to new experiences. In addition, they should be good thinkers and passionate about what they do as well as the content in which they work. The combination of these traits make up the core knowledge and skills for teachers in the instruction of the gifted learner and provide for the highest quality in instruction for the learners they serve (VanTassel-Baska, 2005).

Continued professional development is an important element in creating the most effective instructional programs for gifted learners. Ongoing communication and learning will dictate best practices and provide a framework for the implementation therein. Teachers require in-depth training on a continual basis in order to develop and demonstrate their own skill with differentiation and understanding the changing needs of a gifted learner. “Sustained professional development is also necessary in areas of program delivery” (VanTassel-Baska, 2005, p. 96). Thus, it is essential that all stakeholders commit to forward progress and willingly approach implementation through the appropriate professional development requirements.

Principal Leadership in Rural Schools

The job of a rural school principal presents both unique challenges and formidable opportunities for success. “Currently, principals are involved with a variety of programs offered in schools, such as IDEA, English Language Learners, Title I remedial services, migrant education, and gifted and talented programs” (Lewis et al., 2007, p. 57). Furthermore, discipline, curriculum and instruction, site-based planning,

athletic competitions, facility maintenance, and more tend to consume much of a principal's school day, not to mention self-care and their own professional learning. However, it is important to understand the big picture as it relates to the rural school principalship when considering instructional programming, specifically that of gifted education.

Characteristics of Rural School Principals

The situational reality of a rural school principal can be described through the following five characteristics. First, most rural school principals do not have an assistant principal or special support staff that works to support their position. Second, most rural school principals are given extra duties through shared assignments, the assignment of multiple campuses, or other specific duties. Next, discipline on a rural school campus tends to be less complex and less severe than urban counterparts. Next, the rural community network is more powerful and the principal role tends to be much more visible within the community. Lastly, there is often a lack of organizational or peer support for rural school principals (Hill, 1993).

Within rural school settings, principals are sole administrators on campuses that may span multiple grade levels. While the number of students is fewer, the job responsibilities and the activities that must be completed each day remain the same. Buckingham (2001) makes this point by stating that principals of small schools must “be everything to everybody all the time” (p. 28). The duties remain the same regardless of size, but with fewer students comes less assistance and more accountability to the

everyday operation of the school campus. Similarly, it is not uncommon for principals in rural schools to wear numerous hats. Rural principals often have to fill whatever school position is needed whether that is cafeteria worker, bus driver, substitute teacher, or others (Parson & Hunter, 2019). In some cases, the principal may serve as the district superintendent at the same time or may teach a class on a daily basis, creating and planning instruction in addition to administrative tasks.

The nature of discipline in rural schools is less complex and less severe than larger counterparts, requiring a much more consistent and well-developed system for discipline across the campus. Although less complex, Hill (1993) stated “the result can easily be, however, that the principal’s time is absorbed by relatively minor situations that would be handled at the classroom level elsewhere” (p. 79). Furthermore, the discipline issues also quickly travel through the small town network and become the talk of the barber shop, often lighting one more fire that the principal will end up fighting before the day’s end.

This scenario leads to the next characteristic which describes the strong rural network of community that exists both outside and within the school itself. Because of the nature of small towns, the principal is more often seen out and about within the community, and is often an integral part of that community as well (Buckingham, 2001). Additionally, the principal, by nature of the small community, is more visible and approachable by teachers in a collaborative teamwork style of leadership. “Successful rural principals are available when teachers need them” (Preston & Barnes, 2017, p. 9).

There is great value placed on informal meetings and collaborative approaches between teachers and administrators to meet the needs of students across campus on a routine and ongoing basis.

Lastly, the rural school principal tends to operate in isolation. With no counterparts across town in another school campus to rely on for collaboration through administrative team meetings, the principal is left to be independent in all processes. Professional learning and staff development rests oftentimes on the shoulders of the rural principal to be both administrator and teacher. The principal leads data analysis, builds campus plans, evaluates programs, and so much more. However, according to Lewis et al (2007), these processes do not often leave time for planning and preparation of special programs, leading to an unintentional inattention to and lack of knowledge about a diverse group of students being served on the school campus. “Freeing up some of the principal’s time seems a necessity in order to allow even the most effective leaders to build strong, integrated services for their students, including those who are gifted” (Lewis et al, 2007, p. 61).

Leadership Capacity of Rural School Principals

Although the duties are numerous and the demands are great, the rural school principal has the capacity to be a voice for every learner on campus through the leadership practices modeled each day. In fact, Hill (1993) stated, “Rural principals may have more latitude in shaping school programs since all responsibilities fall directly on their shoulders” (p. 77-78). The principal has the autonomy on rural campuses to

develop instructional programs geared to meet individual needs of all students. Although resources may be limited, the principal must be willing to seek out solutions and reach out to partners in education that can complement his/her own weaknesses. “Rural principals are in an ideal position to lead change and to be an instructional leader” (Preston & Barnes, 2017, p. 10). They understand the values within their own school setting and can deliver staff development and teacher training in the manner most effective to serve their unique population of students.

When considering leadership specific to gifted education programs, especially with the absence of state mandates, the role of principals is crucial in considering the needs of gifted learners in high school settings. “Administrator attitudes toward gifted education dictate its emphasis in the school” (Dixon, 2018, p. 244). The leadership of the principal can serve to build effective programs and practices or conversely, neglect the needs of the gifted learners. The capacity for change lies within the leadership of rural high school principals. It is important for leaders to see and understand the bigger picture when considering the needs of every learner across the campus and make adjustments where needed to encourage and support programmatic approaches. As Dixon (2015) states, “options for gifted students won’t just miraculously appear in schools: someone has to take charge and make them happen” (p. 244). In rural school settings given the absence of a program coordinator responsible for gifted education, this task most often falls to the campus principal.

Although in the prime position to impact change, principals oftentimes have so many diverse responsibilities. Thus, while their breadth of knowledge is substantial, their depth of knowledge may be more limited in scope. Therefore, self-reflection and professional growth opportunities are important to the principal in developing a solid instructional framework on the campus. “In these standard-driven times, it is a strong and forward-looking principal who recognizes that all students need to learn something new each day” (Lewis et al, 2007, p. 57). The principal is charged with ensuring the learning of all students. This can be accomplished through the appropriate training of teachers, including teachers of gifted students, so that individual needs of students are met and students can realize their potential in the rural education setting. “All an appropriate education for the gifted takes is a bit of political courage, the flexibility to try different options, and a conviction that all kids deserve to have their needs met” (Davidson, et al., 2006, p. 136).

CHAPTER III

METHOD

Introduction

The purpose of my study was to investigate the perceptions of (a) gifted program design and delivery in rural secondary schools, (b) professional development opportunities in rural secondary schools related to gifted education, and (c) the inclusion and support of campus leadership among campus principals of gifted programs in small, rural public high school settings within a region of a Southwestern state that include large numbers of such school settings. This chapter will include research design and approach, participants, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis.

Research Approach

A case study research design was utilized in this study. According to Yin (2009), case studies are used to explain, describe, and explore events in the everyday contexts in which they occur. The purpose of this study was to utilize the case study approach in order to explore the experiences of rural high school principals located in a targeted region that includes a large number of rural school districts in a Southwestern state as related to gifted education programming. This approach included qualitative methodologies and sought to describe what is taking place and interpret the experiences of rural high school principals rather than establish a causal relationship or pattern.

Participants

The target population for this study was 23 rural public high schools in a region of a Southwestern state that include large numbers of such school settings. Rural schools are defined as having a growth rate less than 20% with an enrollment between 300 and the state median of 897, or less than 300, according to the Texas Education Agency (2020). The participants in this study included 7 high school campus level administrators in each rural public school district located within this geographical region. Participants were 43% female and 57% male. The breakdown of administrative experience is shown below in Table 2.

Table 2*Administrative Experience*

Participant	Total Years: HS Principal	Total Years: Principal All levels	Total Years: GT Teacher or Admin	Other Admin Experiences	Other Educator Experience
Principal Smith	9.5	6.5	16	Elem/JH Principal	JH/HS Teacher, JH/HS Coach
Principal Jones	4	3	3	Elem Principal, Elem AP	Primary Teacher, Curriculum Director
Principal Brown	2	2	2	JH Principal	Instructional Coach, Literacy Specialist, HS Girls Athletic Coordinator, ELA Teacher, JH/HS Coach
Principal Grant	2	4	3	JH Principal, Elem/JH AP	JH/HS Teacher, Special Education
Principal King	5	0	5	N/A	Ag Teacher
Principal Mays	1	0	4	JH/HS AP	JH/HS Teacher, JH/HS Coach
Principal Scott	1	1	15	Elem AP	JH/HS Teacher, JH/HS Coach, Special Education

Data Collection and Instruments

Data were collected using multiple collection methods. These included open-ended surveys in the first phase of the study. In the second phase, interviews with campus-level administrators were conducted on an individual basis.

Instrumentation included an open-ended survey instrument which was field tested on a small group that consisted of two former rural high school administrators and two current gifted program teachers to determine the clarity of directions and survey questions. Feedback was elicited from each participant in the pre-test process. Instrumentation also included a researcher developed interview protocol (Table 2). The protocol was presented for a face validity examination with an expert panel consisting of two rural superintendents, one rural assistant superintendent, and two gifted program coordinators.

Open-Ended Survey

The survey included open-ended questions divided into five separate sections. These sections include: (a) demographics, (b) program delivery and design, (d) program evaluation, (e) professional development opportunities, (f) leadership support (see Appendix).

The first section consisted of basic demographic information to identify the person completing the survey, their title, and the district. Within this section, the demographics of the school district were broken down into key elements to include size and teaching credentials throughout the campus. Additionally, this section of the survey addressed the definition of the gifted program within the district.

The next sections included a focus on program delivery and design. This section of the survey was intended to describe the type of program in place to serve the gifted

students specifically at the high school campus. This included information on settings, coursework, and curricular focus of the gifted program.

The questions within section three served to explore the perceptions of the effectiveness of the gifted program through program evaluation and a general reflection on the program. This section was followed up with a focus on professional development opportunities for gifted teachers, administrators, and regular education teachers in section four. Then, the support and involvement of campus leadership was assessed in section five. Lastly, a final question assessed the willingness of the principal to participate in further interviews to obtain a deeper understanding and more detailed experiential picture of the campus leader. The open-ended survey provided a framework from which to build a more clear understanding of the gifted program within the rural high school.

Interviews

Interviews can yield deep understanding and connections to the phenomenon being studied. It is said that “interviewing is one of the most common and most powerful ways we use to try to understand our fellow human beings” (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 47). Thus, interviews were an important aspect of data collection and individual interviews in particular were used within this research study. Participants for the interviews consisted of a group of 5 campus administrators selected from the included schools. Each interview was recorded for accuracy.

Semi-Structured Format of Interviews

The individual interviews were semi-structured in order to allow for a dialogue to occur as a result of the line of questioning. This context provided for a greater understanding of the instructional programs as well as additional programmatic needs as perceived by the participants in the study.

Interview Protocol

The participants were asked the same guiding questions, however due to the nature of participant answers, not every participant answered the same amount of questions. Additionally, some questions were not asked to every participant given their responses to previous questions. However, each interview remained focused on the same principles related to the state of gifted education on the high school campus.

Table 3 details the questions that were asked to all participants. The first two questions were intended to establish a foundational understanding of both the participants' role on the campus as well as their involvement in the gifted education program. This was helpful to understand the depth of information that may be found with regards to the extensiveness of participation within the gifted education program. Questions #3 and #4 were designed to provide a description of the programmatic approaches that have been used in the gifted program as well as the benefits to students served by the program. This helped to clarify the understanding of the program with regards to the instructional practices that take place in the gifted setting and the inherent benefits of the practices.

Questions #5 through #8 were meant to assess the administrator's satisfaction level and familiarity with the approaches provided by the school district. Through this line of questioning, it was expected that deficiencies in expectations would be addressed as well as reasoning for those deficiencies from the perspective of the leaders. The final two questions appealed to the participants as partners in the gifted education programming and addressed their ability to include themselves in the role as partner in the learning and gifted education program.

Table 3

Interview Protocol

Questions

1. Tell me about professional career up to this point and your role with gifted education.
 2. Describe the gifted program on your campus and how you feel about the effectiveness of the program.
 3. What benefits do you feel students receive through the GT program in your high school? Are there any perceived harmful effects?
 4. Describe your satisfaction level with the programmatic approach currently used by your high school campus? If dissatisfied with this approach, what would you identify as most problematic? Why?
 5. In what ways do you feel that the current program challenges students and encourages independent professional level work as prescribed by the state plan?
 6. What types of professional learning are your teachers engaged in to support gifted instruction? Are regular education teachers participants in the same learning experiences? Who decides what type of professional learning is needed?
 7. How do you as a leader encourage and support the GT program on your high school campus? What professional learning are you engaged in as it relates to gifted learners?
 8. What do you think would benefit you as the campus leader in the implementation and delivery of the gifted program?
 9. What are the best practices within the GT program on your campus? What are the biggest pitfalls/hurdles? What do you need to overcome those hurdles?
 10. Is there any additional information or concerns that you would like to add that these questions have not allowed?
-

Data Analysis

Hayes and Singh (2012) stated that “qualitative data collection and analysis must occur concurrently” (p, 294). Thus, throughout the process of collecting data and

reviewing that information, the data was analyzed and interpreted as the study grew and progressed in nature. Qualitative data analysis involves coding and connecting relationships among variables defined within the study. As the researcher interacts with the data, more can be collected, reduced, and then ultimately categorized. The analysis itself is breaking down the data into pieces and assembling those pieces into a meaningful pattern (Jorgensen, 1989).

Coding and Thematic Development

After data collection was complete, a thorough investigation into emergent patterns commenced. A more intense system of codes and coding emerged through thematic development to allow for an organizational structure in the display of patterns and themes as they occurred throughout the analysis process. As Boyatzis (1998, p. 31) states, “a good thematic code is one that captures the qualitative richness of the phenomenon.” Additionally, the codes were developed through reduction of the raw data, identification of themes, comparison of themes, code creation, and ultimately the determination of code reliability (Boyatzis, 1998).

Trustworthiness

Ensuring the validity, or trustworthiness, of this study was paramount throughout the research design and implementation. Triangulation of data through the use of surveys as well as interviews provided varied perspectives and worked to strengthen findings within the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Additionally, through assurances in

credibility, authenticity and conformability in research strategies, a greater reliability was achieved throughout the study.

Reflexive Journaling

Considering the significant role that the researcher plays in the context of this study, Hayes and Singh (2012) stressed the importance of keeping adequate field notes and journals throughout the process of data collection. Given this design with interviews being a large portion of the data collection process, these strategies provided a framework in which data could be accurately collected and maintained for further analysis. Transcription of interviews was also noted promptly. Similarly, the personal perceptions of the researcher were maintained in a journal format.

Member Checking

Further efforts were made in order to ensure the greatest level of reliability in the representation of the data as it relates to the administrator perspectives of school district approaches to gifted education, including member checking. Member checking is known to be a key strategy in establishment of trustworthiness in the context of a research study (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The continued involvement of the participants within the study was imperative in understanding the full impact of the findings as well as to alleviate any misunderstandings or unintended themes that could have developed over the course of the study. The participants who were interviewed were asked to review the data to check for accuracy in the interpretation of their intent through the interview process. Each participant was given the opportunity to correct any errors and

confirm the collected data in order to validate the process and provide essential feedback pertinent to the study.

Summary

The goal of this study was to investigate the principal perceptions of gifted education programming in rural high schools within the central Texas region as it relates to program design and delivery, professional development opportunities, and administrative support and involvement. Throughout the study, qualitative methods to include an open-ended survey and individual interviews were utilized.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of my study was to investigate campus principal perceptions of (a) gifted program design and delivery in rural secondary schools, (b) professional development opportunities in rural secondary schools related to gifted education, and (c) the inclusion and support of campus leadership among campus principals of gifted programs in small, rural public high school settings within a region of a Southwestern state that include large numbers of such school settings. This chapter includes a review of findings from the open-ended survey as well as semi-structured interviews conducted with campus principals in the targeted rural high school settings.

Survey Results

The open-ended survey was completed by 7 of the 23 campus principals in small, rural public high school settings within the targeted region. The experience level of most participants was less than five years in their current role as high school principal. Only two showed no principal experience prior to their current position. The participants indicated that their experiences as professional educators had occurred mostly at the junior high and high school levels with only one participant describing a background in elementary education. Two participants indicated a background in special education, and none indicated a professional history as a dedicated teacher for gifted education, although all participants specified experience administering gifted programs.

The next phase of the survey included questions related the specific campus demographics including student and teacher counts. This data is important in the consideration of size and the teacher/student ratios given the rural nature of the school setting. In addition, the number of gifted students on the campus provides insight into the further design and implementation of the gifted service delivery offered within the campus. The student and teacher count information is provided in Table 4.

Table 4

Student and Teacher Counts

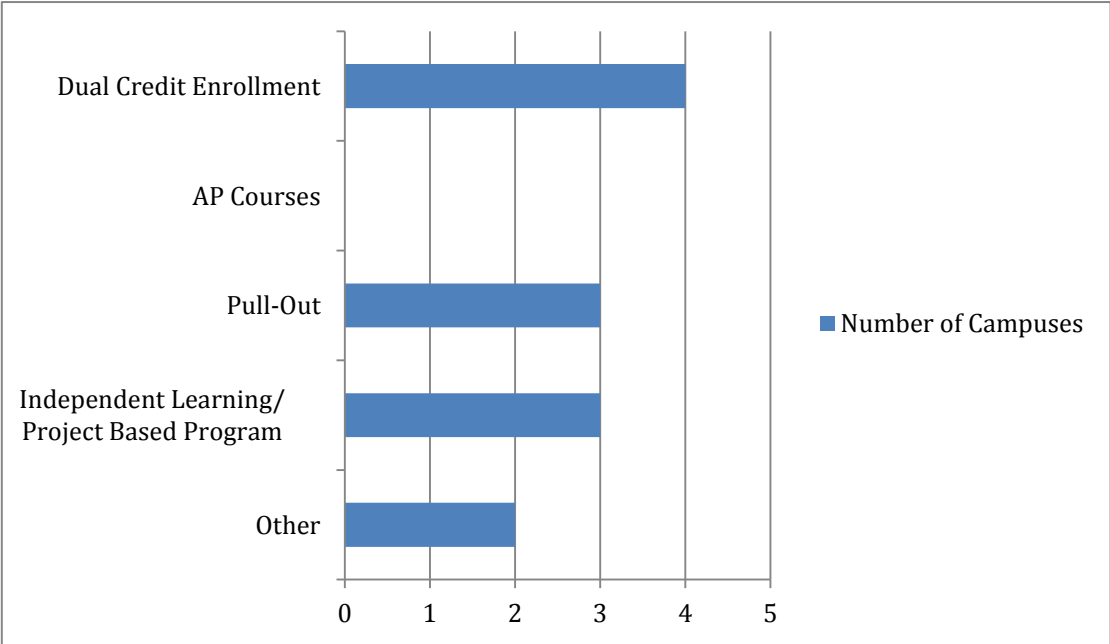
Participant	Campus Student Count	Combined JH & HS Campus	Campus GT Student Count	Campus Certified Teacher Count	Campus GT Teacher Count
Principal Smith	175	No	10	22	10
Principal Jones	225	No	27	26	0
Principal Brown	232	Yes	14	23	2
Principal Grant	265	Yes	12	30	24
Principal King	158	No	20	30	2
Principal Mays	375	Yes	30	40	3
Principal Scott	243	Yes	10	25	2

It is important to note that 57% of the campus principals participating in the survey reported having a combined junior high and high school student population as there is one principal that oversees both groups of students within the same campus. Two campus principals reported that many of their certified teachers on campus have also completed the 30 hour training required for gifted education and are qualified gifted education teachers whereas the other five campuses have smaller numbers of trained teachers for gifted programs.

Within the survey, participants were asked to detail the manner in which gifted students were served on their high school campus. The results are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Program Delivery



The options not included in survey responses, marked other, include honors level programs as well as shortened time periods within the school day for gifted students to meet with a teacher during a campus-wide tutorial time. Most campuses reported using dual credit courses to meet the needs of their gifted students. There were no campuses participating in the survey that delivered gifted education through the use of AP courses.

The next few questions on the survey asked specific questions about the gifted program on campus with regards to participation, fidelity, and level of challenge. The questions and responses are provided in Table 5.

Table 5

Gifted Program

Question	Yes	No
Do all identified gifted students participate in gifted services?	43%	57%
In your opinion, do the services provided for gifted students on your campus meet their needs?	57%	43%
Do you feel that the gifted program delivery appropriately challenges gifted learners?	57%	43%

Given this data, it is apparent that the principal perceptions regarding the fidelity of the program with regards to having educational needs met as well as the level of challenge presented within the academic program for gifted learners is split. In considering the strengths and weaknesses of the existing programs for gifted learners on campus, the principals listed the following strengths: college credit, flexibility and enrichment

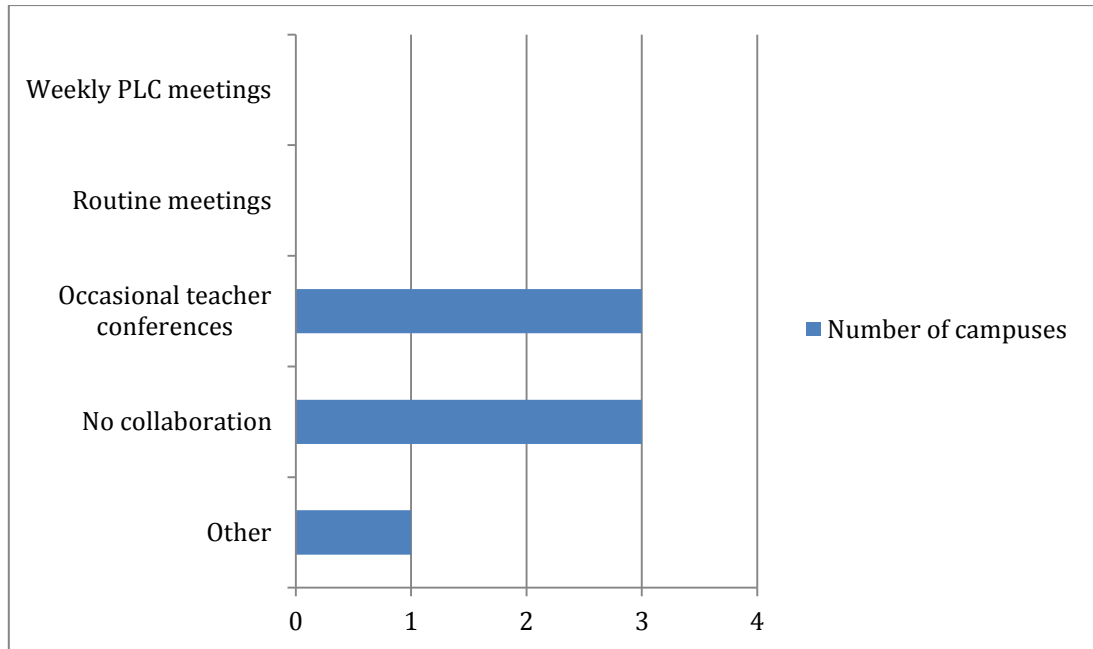
opportunities, designated time without missing academic coursework, designated GT teachers, and independent projects provide for greater student interest and passion development. Conversely, when asked to identify program weaknesses, principals listed the following: online dual credit classes are not always challenging, gifted students are very involved on campus and don't have time for additional projects, expense, and providing challenge in specific area of talent. Thus, while the programs held many positive attributes, there were significant concerns as well.

With regards to professional development, the participants each identified the Education Service Center within their region as the primary contact for training resources. This included professional development for both teachers and administrators alike. In addition, two campuses also utilized Eduhero, an online professional development provider, for annual updates and required training hours for teachers and administrators. One campus also reported the utilization of district-led training for teachers as well. When asked about their own professional development directly related to gifted education, the principal participants listed the GT updates provided by the Education Service Center and one principal had received the 30 hour training course as well. There were no additional trainings or professional development opportunities mentioned within the data.

Teacher collaboration with regards to gifted learners was the focus of one survey question. Participants were asked to identify the manner in which teachers worked together to discuss the needs of the students. The results are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Teacher Collaboration



The Other as identified by a single participant included consultation by the campus GT teacher to include the use of GT folders with accommodation style plans for each gifted student distributed to all connected campus teachers. There were no campuses that met weekly or routinely to discuss the needs of the gifted students. The campuses were split evenly between no collaboration whatsoever and occasional conferencing with regards to the needs of the gifted students.

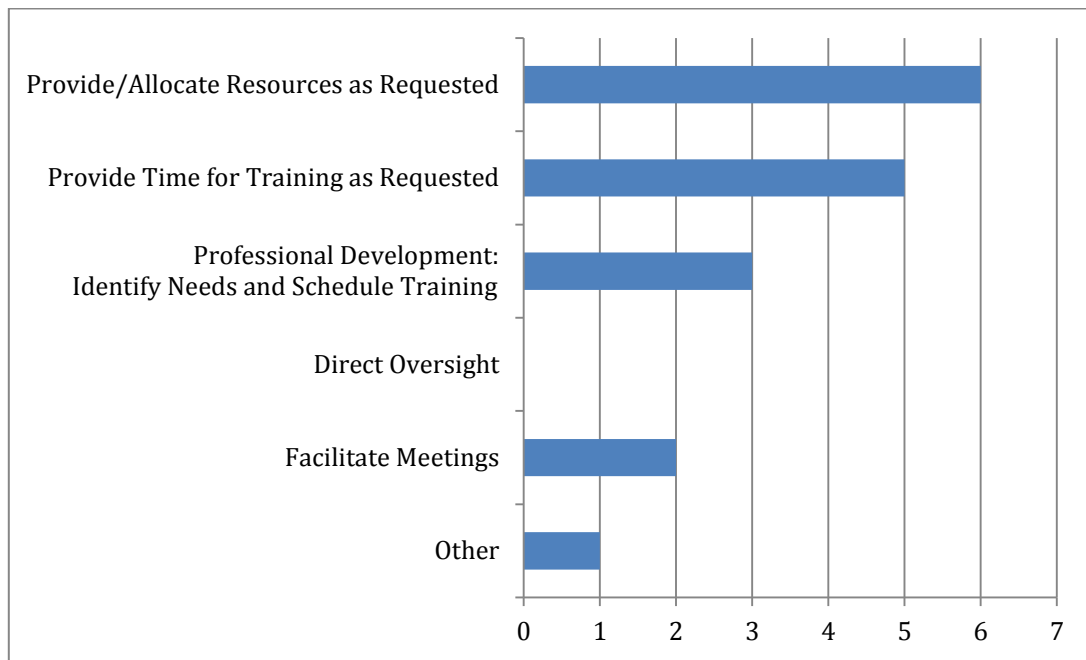
The support of the principal in gifted education programming is an important consideration on rural school campuses. The principal participants were asked to detail

the manner in which they provided support, and they were not limited to one answer.

Figure 4 illustrates the support mechanisms provided by the participants in this study.

Figure 4

Administrator Support



The Other as described by one participant includes the creation of a new GT position to oversee the GT program on campus and provide that teacher with an additional conference period to allow for the development and implementation of a gifted program on the campus. There were no principals that supported the program through direct oversight, but most contributed through the allocation of needed resources for the

program. Professional development time and opportunity was also a common contribution amongst the 7 principals within the study.

Lastly, the principals were asked to provide recommendations to improve the gifted program on their respective campuses. This question provided the opportunity to given an open-ended response. Three principals indicated the need for additional training and support for the program as a whole while one principal indicated that implementation of a project-based program would improve the overall quality of the gifted services on campus. Additional staffing was identified as a need by one principal as well. Three principals indicated no recommendations.

In consideration of the overarching research questions, the participants are evenly split in their perceptions of the overall effectiveness of the program at their respective campuses. At the same time, there is a disparity in the identification and delivery of professional development for gifted teachers as well as administrators as most have not participated in additional training above and beyond the required training and annual updates. Furthermore, while the campus administrators provide support through the allocation of resources, there is little to no direct oversight of the gifted education programs by principals on the campuses represented within this study.

Interview Data

An individualized, semi-structured interview was conducted in the next phase of this study to establish a dialogue around the gifted education program on the campus. Two survey participants left their principal position before the completion of this study

thus were unable to complete the interview process. However, 5 of the 7 survey participants completed an individual interview to further explore their thoughts and perceptions as they related to gifted programs on their respective campuses. The participants were asked the same guiding questions, however due to the nature of participant answers, not every participant answered the exact questions in the same order. The data collected through the interview process was used to validate the results found within the survey and further investigate the perceptions of high school principals with regards to gifted education programs on their respective campuses.

Program Design

In reviewing the data with regards to program effectiveness specifically related to program design, program benefits, and program challenges, the perceptions of the principals interviewed were fairly consistent amongst the participants. It is first important to note the background of the principals in relation to their perceptions as the personal and professional experiences inform their professional practice. While the principals all had a somewhat similar background in secondary education, the personal experiences were also important. One participant, Principal Mays, had a gifted child and was married to gifted education teacher, thus had a different perspective on the nature of the gifted learner and how the program on the campus impacted the student directly. Two participants, Principals Scott and Grant, were former special education teachers with strong feelings with regards to twice-exceptional learners and the evaluation/identification piece of gifted programming. In addition, it was important to

consider the length of time each principal had been in their position, and the dynamics of changing work locations.

Understanding how the gifted program operated on each campus was a key component of the interview process. There was a large degree of consistency in the way these 5 campuses structured their program on a daily basis. Of the 5 campuses represented, 3 operated in a pull-out manner in which students were involved in an independent research project to varying degrees considering implementation. While program specifics were more diverse, the guiding principles were consistent. Each of these campuses was in the first or second year of implementation and was involved in the continuous evaluation and improvement processes where gifted education was concerned. The consistent theme amongst these three principals, Principal Scott, Mays, and Grant, was that of enrichment over more work. It was apparent that these principals focused on programs that served to encourage individual talent levels as they moved away from one-size-fits-all approach to gifted programming. By focusing on the pull-out programs and project based learning opportunities, students were guided towards professional presentations to culminate their efforts. It was through the leadership of the principal that these efforts to revamp and renew the program from what was described as non-existent and ineffective to passion projects and independently guided learning opportunities came to life on these campuses. All three principals expressed hope that the redesign of the program would eventually result in stronger programs for gifted

learners but cited that it was a work in progress and would continue to need attention in order to continue on the current path.

The benefits cited by these principals with regards to the pull-out programs being implemented currently were also similar in nature. Principals felt that the push towards independent level work elicited independent and creative thinking in the students. Students were able to step out of the normal box and find, create, and explore based on their individual desires and passions. Principals appreciated the individualized work and the hands-on nature of the provided structures. In addition, students were able to express their own learning in a variety of ways while being challenged to take things a step further in the process. However, it should be noted that two of these principals, Principal Grant and Mays, expressed concern in monitoring the program to ensure that the projects and independent learning tasks did not become simply more work but were maintained as integrated units of study within the normal school day and served to extend learning for gifted students. Principal Grant stated, “I absolutely despise the extra work that's considered for GT students. I feel like, especially at the high school level, those are my dual credit/AP kids, I already know that they are pushing above and beyond, but still I've always felt like I would rather the teacher say that kid has been identified GT and just always push them in an extension of what they're currently doing”.

Of the principals interviewed, the remaining two, Principals Jones and Smith, detailed their program design implementation through dual credit course offerings and

honors level courses. Principal Jones did add that the gifted students on the campus were also offered an opportunity through the regional education service center to conduct an independent research project but to date, no student had completed one. This principal also commented that while this is the program that currently exists on campus, she does not agree with the way it is run, noting that the current design is the way it had always been done and students are on their own in choosing appropriate coursework to meet their needs. She further stated, “I don't feel like we do a good job serving now, and I don't know how to change that”. Principal Smith echoed this concern in describing the program on his campus and stated that there was no plan in place currently and no system to build a program for gifted learner. He stated, “We've got a lot of adjustments, I know, to make sure we know who our students are”. He commented that currently there were lots of holes in the system from identification to service options. He also alluded to the fact that there had been a marked level of administrator turnover in the recent campus history. Neither of these principals felt that the program was sufficient to meet the specific needs of each gifted student as individual learners appropriately.

Although these principals did not place much value in the programs on their campus, they did feel that students received benefits through the freedom of choice in their coursework and dual credit class selections so that they could match their coursework with their talent areas. Principal Jones stated, “They (students) do have the ability to choose what it is they want to take, we're not forcing them into, well, you may be gifted in mathematics, but we're going to put you in an English class. We don't force

them to take that English if that's not an area they feel comfortable with. So I think the freedom of choice and them knowing their own strengths, they can choose to do that". This provided students the opportunity to delve deeper into content areas that were of greater interest to them and supported their learning in this regard.

Professional Development

Through discussions regarding professional development opportunities, campus principals presented a fairly cohesive pattern of opportunities for both teachers and leaders utilizing regional service centers as the primary provider for learning related to gifted education programs. However, there were multiple processes for professional development decision-making and needs assessment across these campuses. While the basic 30 hour required gifted training programs and annual updates were important to the principals, additional training opportunities were consistently unavailable amongst the participants.

Focusing on teacher professional development, all campus principals reported that at least one teacher, and in some cases all campus teachers, had received the 30-hour basic required training for gifted teachers, and routinely received the 6 hour annual update. On most campuses represented, all regular education teachers also received the annual 6-hour update training during pre-service on an annual basis. While in most cases training was provided by the regional service center, three campuses also reported using Eduhero, an online professional development provider used by many rural school districts to supplement professional learning. Through Eduhero, teachers received annual

training in an online asynchronous format that allowed for individualized pacing and timing. In addition, Principal Mays utilized the campus GT coordinator to provide in-house training during pre-service to review the components of the gifted program and assist teachers in understanding the nature and needs of gifted learners. However, through all professional development programs, the consistent theme is the completion of the required training, with no additional support for gifted education programs.

Moving to the training and professional development for principals as leaders providing ultimate oversight of gifted programs on their respective campuses, the same concepts held true as seen with teacher professional development. Three of the principals, Principal Scott, Jones, and Grant, reported that they had received the basic 30 hours when they were teachers, but since that time, they complete the 6-hour administrator update and nothing more. Similarly, the principals utilize both the regional service centers as well as Eduhero to comprise the professional development opportunities. Two principals, Principal Smith and Mays, reported that while they do not seek out specific gifted education training, they work on their own professional development plan to improve their own leadership and work to implement new initiatives on their respective campuses. These included the Harvard leadership program as well as Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) and Project-Based Learning (PBL) training programs. While not directly connected to gifted education program, the STEM and PBL trainings did correlated with the campus goals in the

development and implementation of the pull-out gifted education program, although these programs are not restricted to serving only gifted students.

It is interesting to consider the development and implementation of professional development plans with regards to needs assessment and delivery. The principals were quite divided in the development of plans as different campuses handled training in many different ways. On one campus, according to Principal Jones, the Assistant Superintendent provided a list of 10 courses within Eduhero and all teachers and principals must complete at least 6 of these courses. So, while there is some degree of teacher choice in which courses are selected for participation, the choices are limited. On another campus, according to Principal Grant, district policy dictates the professional development plan as all campus teachers are required to receive the 30 hour training followed by the 6 hour annual update. In addition, the campus GT coordinator and teacher may offer recommendations for training as needed given specific campus initiatives. One yet another campus, Principal Scott makes all decisions on what training will be provided to teachers. Typically, these trainings are formatted through Eduhero although gifted training has not been a priority for the campus. Similarly, Principal Mays reported that the principal also provides a detailed list of training options to teachers, typically resulting from a teacher survey allowing campus input. However, if campus teachers locate other trainings of interest, the teachers can petition for approval from the principal to participate in alternate training sessions, usually through the regional service center. That particular principal also stated that, "If teachers go to the

Region Center, they are required to come back and share. I'm not going to pay \$90 for training that isn't going to be used by all teachers." Lastly, Principal Smith reported that teachers have complete freedom of choice on their own professional development but they must utilize the regional service center as the provider. Teacher training is completely the responsibility of the teacher to choose and receive. So, while professional development is occurring as it relates to gifted education to some degree, the consistency in the approach and oversight is widely different and very limited in scope.

Principal Support

In the discussions of gifted education programs within these 5 campuses, the principals presented various concerns that they had as educational leaders with regards to the impact of the program on meeting the needs of gifted students. Through that discussion, each principal talked about specific barriers to the effective implementation of a program that would be best suited on their campus to meet the needs of the students. The barriers presented were consistent among all campuses and included time and money as the predominant factors that are prohibitive in building the most impactful programs. Also mentioned as barriers were communication, staffing, buy-in, and general apathy where gifted education is concerned.

With relation to time, principals believed that teachers needed more time to plan effective lessons for gifted students as they were tired and stressed from the full course loads that they teach on a daily basis within the rural school setting. Most teachers have multiple preparations each day, so coordinating the lessons for gifted learners is just one

more additional task that they are forced to contend with given little to no extra time. In addition, there is little time for principals to fully evaluate the program as it exists and reformat it to make it more effective given the multiple hats that a rural principal wears each day. Principal Jones expressed great frustration with the lack of time stating that “If I could do a staff analysis and figure out how to move people around and how we can do more with what we have, I could do better. There just isn’t time for that though.”

Similarly, the campuses that have a GT coordinator share that position with a full teaching load as well. Thus, the GT coordinator is spread thin and unable to devote the time that is really preferable into building the most effective gifted program possible given the lack of time for tracking and development of best practices. In addition, allowing appropriate time for training is problematic for all staff was marked as a concern as well. An interesting comment was also made by Principal Grant with regards to student time as well. “These kids are busy as they are typically our top kids who are involved in everything. They don’t have time for something extra.” Therefore, it is evident that in rural schools, time is a critical barrier, and one that is difficult to overcome.

Funding is a significant consideration in the implementation and delivery of a gifted education program in a rural campus as well. With tight budgets, there is little money left to hire dedicated personnel to structure and facilitate gifted education program. Thus, the gifted coordinators end up carrying full time teaching loads as well as coordinating the gifted program on campus. Additionally, of the five campuses

represented within the study, only two had campus-level coordinators. Thus, the program responsibility was directly placed on the campus principal. All five principals believed that money was a limiting factor in the ability to build effective programs for gifted students. The funding for dedicated staffing both to facilitate and teach gifted programs was a significant concern for these leaders, especially considering that in budgeting for personnel, the cost was an annual cost, not simply a quick one-time expense that could perhaps be funded through alternative means. Along these lines, finding to pay for substitute teachers in order to allow teachers to attend professional development during the school year is costly, this creating a gap in targeted learning and training. Additionally, Principal Mays commented that he would like to have additional funds available for trips so that gifted learners could go out beyond their small community to see creativity in action through real world applications of their project study in the classroom. When asked what he would like to be able to do for his students to support the program, he replied, “to be able to take trips, you know, to go on some of these field trips to these places where these creative minds are just coming up with all these ideas of things to come around in the future”. However, these trips were not possible at this time due to limited funding.

Other specific barriers to consider were communication and buy-in. More than half of the principals reported a desire for increased communication with parents to build support for the program and offer a better picture of “what we are doing and why” with regards to gifted education program that may look different given the nature of project

based learning as opposed to more traditional methods of classroom instruction.

Similarly, student buy-in and apathy was reported as problem areas for Principal Grant and Scott who are working to reformat their programs to make them more independent and project based in nature. It is important that the school community understand who gifted students really are from the inside out, and that schools support the needs of the gifted learners, without taking away from other school programs at the same time.

In addition to a focus on barriers to successful and effective programming for gifted students, the principals reported the manner in which they provided support for the program as well. Other than support with professional development planning and allocation of resources, Principals Scott and Mays emphasized the importance of being present with the gifted learners specifically related to the project based learning that the students were engaged in within the classroom. These two principals felt strongly about visibility and direct student support. They made it a priority to be in the classroom with the gifted students especially during formal presentations where the cumulative learning projects were presented. Principal Mays remarked that he scheduled the time on his calendar and protected that time to ensure his availability. When asked how he supported gifted students he stated, “just talking to those kids that are in it and being there for them when they present, you know, that was one thing I put on my calendar and told our office I'm going to, and I'll be going to these three or four days. It was, I'm going to go in there and listen to it every day”. He commented that it was important to him to

“make kids know I care.” Similarly, Principal Scott commented, “I’m out there seeing what these kids are doing and, and applaud along with them, Hey, that’s great. I’m glad you’re doing this project. I want to see the end outcome. I want to read that report you’re doing. Those are things I think that those students see and they’re excited about. And I think it’s important that they know that I care about that”. Other manners that these two mentioned were the display of student work and routine conversations about the projects that the students were engaged in through questioning and expression of genuine interest.

Principal Jones, whose campus served students solely through dual credit enrollment, supported students through the encouragement and facilitation of dual credit coursework. She held conversations with students with regards to the enrollment process and for those students with concerns regarding the self-paced and independent nature of the course, offered regular courses instead so as not to place students in situations where they would not be successful. She commented, “We just encourage kids to take the dual credit, those kids that we feel would receive GT services at another grade level, then we try to encourage them to do that. And it’s funny because sometimes our GT kids, they’re not that dual credit type kiddo, and so we also don’t want to put them in a situation where they’re going to not be successful”. The remaining two principals were more hands-off from direct lines of support and worked through the GT coordinator to make approvals as needed and remain informed about the progress of the program as a whole. Principal Grant offered support to the coordinator through a regular

evaluation of the program in combination with the coordinator. Thus, the approach for principal support amongst these 5 campuses was quite varied for the most part and ranged from more lax coverage to very detailed and involved support.

Program Considerations

In terms of overall effectiveness of gifted education programs on rural campuses, three principals reported great dissatisfaction with the program as it is currently being facilitated on their respective campuses. There are multiple reasons that were given but the centralized theme revolves around student participation and the development of student talent. Principal Grant reported that too often, she sees gifted students being given more work rather than different work which has built a level of apathy towards the entire program as a whole. Additionally, Principal Jones and Smith commented that students are served in areas other than those specified talents of the students which hinder the full development of the overall student potential. Principal Jones went further to say that the benefit of a small school was within the individualized attention possible for all students, but where gifted students are concerned, the program was not effective or efficient in serving those students as a whole as students were not challenged to dig deeper than surface level in all areas of the curriculum.

In the discussion with regards to student evaluation and understanding the specific areas of talent, Principal Grant was quite frustrated that within gifted programs that she has experienced throughout her career, there was no re-evaluation piece that provided for a student's growth and development over the years as a learner. She

commented that in all other program areas including special education, 504, and ESL, students are periodically reviewed and reassessed to determine progress. She stated, “We did this evaluation forever ago and now (students) are GT and they always have been. Well in what? And how? And are they still? And is that relative? I mean, all the time we test, we get kids out of special education. We drop kids from 504 programs. You know, we don't really put many more GT kids in, but do we have kids that aren't considered GT anymore either? And if we do still have them, what's their focus? I think that's a problem”. She went on to say, “But I really think we lose where that kid's strength was when they're identified so early, we don't reevaluate. We don't look again and see where their strengths have developed over time”. She felt strongly that this missing re-evaluation piece hindered the effectiveness of the gifted program not only one her respective campus, but for gifted programming practices in general. Likewise, Principal Scott commented, “I feel like we can identify students based on other things other than just test scores. I think that's where a lot of people kind of fall. You know, we lack in that and lag behind because we use test scores and we're so data driven that sometimes we miss the forest for the trees, sometimes just about kids, you know, what their talents are, what their gifts are”.

Furthermore, dissatisfaction was expressed by Principal Jones in assessing her own knowledge of the gifted education process and stated, “I don't think we do a good job but at the same time I don't know how to change it.” Within this particular campus she felt students were more driven by enrolling in weighted courses that count towards

overall grade point averages and top 10% factors rather than taking courses to engage their talents through gifted education. Thus, the campus solely focused on dual enrollment courses. She felt like gifted students were not served well through this process but also acknowledged her lack of time and commitment in making changes as well. She stated, “If a parent came in and complained about the program, I could make it a priority and find a way to fix it. Don’t fix it if it isn’t broken and right now, parents don’t think it’s broken.” Gifted education programs, admittedly, were not a priority on this campus and ultimately were not positively regarded by the campus principal.

Overarching Needs

In order to better support and facilitate gifted education programs on the campus level, principals were forthcoming with regards to their own deficiencies and needs. Two principals, Principal Grant and Mays, specifically commented on the lack of networking opportunities directly related to gifted education programs in small schools. They both acknowledged training opportunities, but when it came to putting the training into practice, they felt isolated in their efforts and commented that there was no assistance or guidance on best practices to structure programs. Principal Mays commented that he would prefer to have state guidance on how to make the program function, and at the same time, stated that there were no role models or road maps to copy as he worked to develop a stronger gifted program on his campus. Principal Grant shared the exact sentiments as she stated that, “we don’t talk amongst districts...there is no one to help us structure programs.” In fact, Principal Mays reached out to the regional service center

for assistance in building his pull-out project based program and was told that other schools are not building these programs but only serving through honors or dual enrollment programs. He stated, “We've talked to the region center to get ideas from other schools. They tell us like two or three of the schools were calling them like, oh, we do have honors classes and AP. So nobody in high school it seems is really doing GT.” Thus, he felt like he was alone in the initiation of the kind of program he wanted to create for the gifted learners on his campus.

Serving all students effectively is the goal of public education and school administrators of all grade levels. Much focus is put into special education programs and students due to federal mandates, as well as low performing or at-risk students through the Title programs. There are significant amounts of time and money spent in developing programs to meet the needs of each of these learners across the public school system. However, there was a consistent theme that emerged in the interview process with the campus principals that the same is not true for gifted education. In fact, three principals alluded to this during their interview. Principal Scott stated, “We don't serve kids that are strong as much as we serve kids that are struggling.” Principal Grant stated, “The focus has been on low level students and we have left out the upper level.” Finally, yet another principal, Principal Mays, made a similar comment when he said, “Kids that get left behind are generally the high level kids.” Thus, it is apparent that there is a significant concern in meeting the needs of the gifted student population in rural these

school districts as principals work to build educational programs that meet the needs of all student groups.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

In the previous chapter, the presentation of the survey and interview data was provided. This chapter will consist of a discussion of the findings as well as implications for practice and recommendations for future research. The purpose of this chapter will be to review the research questions through a discussion of findings in order to provide implications for professional practice in rural high schools as well as considerations and recommendations for subsequent research.

Discussion

This case study was completed in order to explore the experiences of rural high school principals located in a targeted region that includes a large number of rural school districts in a Southwestern state as related to gifted education programming on the school campus. This study sought to describe what is taking place and interpret the experiences of rural high school principals by answering the following questions:

Question One

What are the campus principal's perceptions of the delivery mode and design for gifted education programs and the effectiveness of the program in meeting the diverse needs of gifted learners on their rural public high school campus? While the programs that were facilitated within the campuses targeted within this study were diverse in nature, there were many similarities in the approach. More than half of the programs

were newly designed programs being implemented within the first or second year and focused on pull-out independent research based projects as the delivery mode. However, the other programs were centered on dual credit and honors level enrollment. Regardless of the delivery mode presented, the principals expressed concern in being able to meet the needs of the gifted students appropriately and cited money, time, and staffing as major barriers to successful integration of an ideal gifted program. The principals each presented concerns for apathy, lack of knowledge, and lack of training beyond the required professional development for GT teachers and administrators. However, there was an acute awareness of the need for improvement and while more than half of the principals were already involved in improvement efforts, the other principals noted the importance and need for change.

Question Two

How do the perceptions of the campus leader correlate with professional development opportunities available to and attended by teachers of gifted students in rural public high schools? While principals generally presented to be somewhat frustrated with the quality of programming and availability for assistance in structuring appropriate programs, there were no specifications for additional professional development opportunities above and beyond the required training for teachers and annual updates for both teachers and administrators. Professional development providers were in most cases limited to regional service centers, Eduhero, and a small degree of in-house district or campus level training that took place. Furthermore, the needs

assessment for professional development was sporadic amongst these five campuses as the burden for planning was spread throughout multiple personnel depending on the campus. For some campuses, the principal made the sole decision, while others sought teacher input. Additional planning was done by central administrative staff or left to the teachers to seek out on their own. Therefore, there was not a defined comprehensive system of professional development on any campus as it related directly to gifted education, despite the program design or delivery mode.

Question Three

In what ways are campus leaders of rural public high schools involved in the gifted education program and related professional development opportunities, and how do they work to support program efforts on the campus? The direct involvement of rural principals in this study within the gifted program was somewhat diverse in nature. While some were heavily involved in the development of new program initiatives and in the direct support and encouragement of students in the program, others took a more hands-off approach. The campuses that had more involved and supportive leaders were the ones who were in the first and second year of implementation of the pull-out programs for independent research based project learning. These campus administrators were present with the students and engaged in conversations surrounding the independent research efforts of the students. They were working to build a more sound structure for learning and recognized the need to serve gifted students and the potential benefits of such service. The other campuses represented served students solely through honors and

dual enrollment and those leaders did not assume an active role in defining additional services or programs for gifted learners as a whole, citing time and money as distractors towards implementation of a more effective program in their opinion. Although these principals could see and understand the need for change in the overall program, there were limiting factors that prohibited their active involvement in the evaluation process. Similarly, professional development opportunities attended by leaders mirrored those attended by teachers in most cases, as the training directly related to gifted learners. Thus, although there was a great deal of engagement within the program structure and design in most cases, the professional development piece was less prominent in the overall determination of importance.

Dimensions of Learning Centered Leadership

The campus principal in a rural high school plays a key role in the development, implementation, and evaluation of the gifted education program on the campus.

Effective school leaders are strong educators, anchoring their work on the central issues of learning and teaching and school improvement. They are moral agents and social advocates for the children and the communities they serve. Finally, they make strong connections with other people, valuing and caring for others as individuals and as members of the educational community (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996, as cited by Murphy, et al., 2006, p. 6).

Through the investigation into the knowledge base of school leaders involved in the development of school programming, and with particular regard to gifted education

programs, there are 8 major dimensions including: vision for learning, instructional program, curricular program, assessment program, communities of learning, resource acquisition and use, organizational culture, and social advocacy.

Vision for Learning

The participants in this study presented with different levels of visioning for their campus as it related to the gifted education program. According to Dwyer (1986, as cited by Murphy et al., 2006), leaders “demonstrate through their actions the organization’s commitment to the values and beliefs at the heart of the mission as well as to the specific activities needed to reach goals” (p. 9-10). The vision of the leader and the purposeful implementation of the gifted program correlated with the personal commitment of the principal. Whereas the feelings of the program design on campus was generally that of dissatisfaction, only about half of the participants had re-envisioned the program and were in the process of implementing change within the gifted program structure on the campus. The commitment to change and implementation of improved programming for gifted students aligned with the personal background of the leader as well. Thus, given the role of a principal in a rural school setting, this visioning set the standard for the gifted program design and delivery on the campuses studied.

Instructional Program

The instructional program of a rural school consists of the educational program as a whole, to include staffing, teacher evaluation and feedback, approach to leadership, and the basic academic time allotted for activities. Approximately half of the participants

described gifted programs that included independent learning or project-based learning initiatives. However others detailed differing programs including AP/honors classes in the implementation of gifted education. While nearly all participants described their programs as offering some degree of freedom of choice for gifted students, the campuses that offered solely AP/honors courses were not able to individualize the course of study for each gifted student. According to Dixon (2006), a “one-size-fits-all education is not adequate, and lock-step provisions for gifted students will not suffice” (p. 235). Thus, it is important to further consider a re-focus on the program offerings and build programs that will sustain student choice and individual means for the development of talent for each gifted learner.

Curricular Program

It is important in a school system to build sound curricular programs and practices. Furthermore, the role of the leader is to integrate seamlessly the various curricular programs offered within the school setting. Eubanks and Levine (1983, as cited by Murphy et al., 2006) when describing curriculum alignment, state that alignment “means that all special programs are brought into the gravitational field of the regular program” (p. 14). When asked about the curricular component of the gifted program on rural campuses, the participants were varied in their responses, and described the instructional arrangements including AP/honors or pull-out programs. Only half described more integrated curricular programs, through the pull-out, in which students were placed into self-directed programs where they were able to explore and

create given the independent nature of those program designs. Dixon (2018) states, as she discusses models of instruction most suited for gifted learners,

One common factor that makes these models well-suited for the education of gifted adolescents is the inclusion of the very important option of independent coursework that culminates in a self-designed project in the student's area of passion or interest. This option is a hallmark of quality secondary programs for gifted adolescents (p. 240).

Rural principals cited many concerns with regards to the implementation of a program and specifically detailed time and money as primary barriers.

Assessment Program

With regards to assessment programs, and the use of data, as it relates to gifted education programs, the participant viewpoints were diverse. While most did not comment to the specific nature of the identification process and the use of true assessment data, there was a definite concern with talent development within the area of giftedness. Principals cited a lack of re-evaluation and lack of initial identification of detailed areas of talent. In general, the participants felt that there was not enough data gathered over time and shared with teachers in order to build sustainable and individualized programs most appropriate for each student. As Dixon (2018) stated, "it is important to remember that secondary gifted adolescents are not a homogeneous group" (p. 239). Thus, more work may need to be done in order to facilitate the

implementation of programs that serve different talents and different learning characteristics for students in rural high school settings.

Communities of Learning

A significant consideration for professional development was given throughout this study. This included professional development for campus teachers as well as that of the principals as well. While all participants indicated that teachers of gifted students participated in the minimum required trainings for gifted learners, there was no evidence that professional development occurred outside of that context to extend the learning for the educators. Given different modes of course offerings, teachers were able in some cases to customize their learning to fit their individual classroom needs, most were prescribed by leadership. Murphy, Elliot, Goldring, and Porter (2006) stated, “Effective leaders thoughtfully attend to their own growth, modeling a lifelong commitment to learning for their colleagues” (p. 16). The participants in this study indicated that while they did participate in the required trainings for gifted education leaders, only two principals extended their own learning to include project-based and STEM learning opportunities that they will utilize to support and encourage the development of these type of learning methodologies within the educational program on their campus. Lastly, an extended community of support for gifted programming is a needed component as reported by the participants in the study as they felt somewhat isolated as they try to build more effective gifted education programs given the lack of available professional networks or exemplar programs available for rural high school campuses. Plucker and

Puryear (2018) acknowledged this feeling as they stated, “small numbers of identified students in isolated areas with a small dedicated teaching staff may result in feelings of isolation in those who serve students in special education of gifted programs” (p. 419).

Resource Acquisition and Use

“Learning-centered school leaders are adept at garnering and employing resources in the service of meeting school goals” (Murphy et al., 2006, p. 20). These resources include both monetary and human capital, both of which may be scarce in a rural school. Participants in this study reported a lack of time, money and personnel as primary barriers to the implementation of their gifted programs. Most participants discussed the need for an additional staff position to oversee and maintain the gifted programs as the principal is spread thin across campus. The addition of staff is directly correlated to available funding. Because funding varies from school to school, the priorities of a school board and the particular values and beliefs of a school leader influences the allocation of funding for gifted programs (Azano, et al., 2021). Furthermore, “opportunity and achievement gaps can be more pronounced for rural students due to financially constrained programming and limited access to out of school resources” (Callahan & Azano, 2019). Similarly, time correlates with funding for the participants as well as they are responsible for the oversight of many other components of the educational program across campus as there are not financial resources or availability to provide additional personnel to support the principals and programs.

Organizational Culture

Effective organizations are marked by a detailed emphasis and commitment to getting results and a generalized orientation toward outcomes (Murphy et al., 2006). Campus expectations and accountability compose this dimension. Throughout the study, several participants cited general apathy for the gifted program as it related to the overall campus culture and stressed the need for greater buy-in on the part of teachers and students. Principals cited the lack of targeted opportunities related to specific talents as a barrier to student buy-in. Similarly, they discussed the lack of time and knowledge in the implementation of a more dynamic program for gifted learners as it related to teacher apathy as well. While rural schools have been found to include a greater sense of community involvement, smaller class sizes and campuses, slower pace of life, closer relationships, and safer schools and communities, it is important to note that these positive attributes do not necessarily translate into positive outcomes (Plucker & Puryear, 2018).

Social Advocacy

The environmental context is the central theme within the bounds of this study. Consideration for gifted programs in rural high school settings set the stage for all aspects included within the study. However, it is important to also consider that rural communities are quite diverse in nature. Plucker and Puryear (2018) state, “it is impossible not to notice the considerable variability in rural communities” (p. 419). Thus, community norms certainly play a role in the development and implementation of

educational programming, and specifically, gifted education in a rural school system. In fact, it should be noted that one principal discussed the program on her campus with great dissatisfaction, but indicated complacency on the part of stakeholders to include parents and community members, and indicated no intent to improve the program at this time. Dixon (2018) commented,

Not all schools are created equal, nor are they all equally prepared to meet the needs of secondary gifted students. But all schools can create an array of available possibilities that respond to the learning characteristics and educational status of a variety of students – some that are easily achieved within the school itself and others that are accessible with creative thought (p. 235).

Implications for Practice

Gifted education programs in rural schools are quite diverse in the structure and programmatic design utilized in order to maximize the achievement and success of gifted learners. As programs are developed that meet the needs of the gifted learners, it is important to create open dialogues and support systems amongst the professional education community as a whole. Building gifted programs requires creativity in the allocation of time and money specifically, thus a network of supportive and knowledgeable mentors is necessary. By sharing experiences, pros and cons, what works, what doesn't work, leaders can avoid potential pitfalls that are detrimental to student success. However, without these established professional networks, leaders feel isolated in their efforts to support and mentor change.

In addition to networking and mentorship, extended professional development through a deeper pool of providers is important to meet the rapidly changing needs of rural public school leaders and teachers alike. With the absence of both time and money, professional development opportunities need to be easily accessible and provide significant insight beyond the scope of the single annual update to reflect current practice specific to gifted learners. The approach within the professional development should be practical and easily accessible to campuses in rural areas as these campuses do not have a large pool of available personnel or financing options. By better meeting the needs of the teachers and leaders who are overseeing and developing gifted programs, the needs of the gifted students are more effectively met as well.

Recommendations for Future Research

The research presented within this study was confined to one geographic region with a large number of rural school districts within a Southwestern state. Thus, more research is needed to include a larger geographic boundary. Similarly, this study only considered the perspective of high school principals since most prior research focused on elementary school gifted programs. Since very little research has been done on rural high school campuses with regards to gifted education programs, additional research should include gifted coordinator, parent, and student perceptions as well in order to fully understand the gifted education program as a whole on a rural high school campus. This type of study would serve to better inform practice at the high school level through the analysis and insights provided by all stakeholders involved in gifted education.

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APPENDIX

GIFTED EDUCATION PROGRAM SURVEY

DEMOGRAPHICS:

Number of years you have been a high school principal?

Number of years as a campus principal at another level (Elem/JH)?

If you have been a principal at another level other than HS, please indicate level and the number of years spent at each of the levels. (ex. 3 years as Elem Principal)

Please list previous positions, not including principal positions (include grade levels).

Number of years of experience teaching/administering gifted education programs? If 1 or more, describe your role with the gifted education program.

Current School District:

Current School Campus:

Number of students served on campus:

Number of gifted students served on campus:

Number of certified teachers on campus:

Number of credentialed gifted teachers on campus:

PROGRAM DELIVERY AND DESIGN:

How are gifted high school students served on your campus?

- a) Independent Learning Projects/Classes
- b) Pull-Out Programs
- c) AP/Pre-AP Courses
- d) Dual Credit Courses
- e) Other (please describe)

Do all identified gifted students participate in gifted services?

- a) Yes
- b) No (please explain)
- c) Describe the curricular focus for the gifted program on your campus.

PROGRAM EVALUATION:

In your opinion, do the services provide for gifted students on your campus meet their needs?

- a) Yes
- b) No (please explain)

Do you feel that the gifted program delivery appropriately challenges gifted learners?

- a) Yes
- b) No (please explain)

What are the specific strengths and weaknesses of the gifted program?

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES:

Types of staff development attended by teachers as it relates to gifted education:

- a) ESC Trainings
- b) Independent Trainings/Private Consultant
- c) District-led Trainings
- d) Other (please describe)

Types of staff development attended by campus principals as it relates to gifted education:

- a) ESC Trainings
- b) Independent Trainings/Private Consultant
- c) District-led Trainings
- d) Other (please describe)

As a campus principal, what professional development have you had as it relates directly to gifted education programming? Please list.

LEADERSHIP SUPPORT:

How do teachers collaborate on your campus with regards to the needs of gifted learners?

- a) Weekly PLC meetings
- b) Routinely scheduled individual meetings
- c) Occasional teacher conferences
- d) No collaboration
- e) Other (please describe)

In what ways do you support the gifted program on your campus?

- a) Provide/allocate resources as requested
- b) Provide time for training as requested
- c) Identify professional development needs and schedule training
- d) Direct oversight of the program
- e) Facilitate campus/community meetings
- f) Other (please describe)

What recommendations would you have for improvement for the gifted program on your campus?

Would you be willing to meet with the researcher to dig deeper into your program and perceptions in a face-to-face (ZOOM) interview to be arranged at your convenience?

- a) Yes – Please provide email address/contact information for scheduling purposes.
- b) No