

# Intersectionality, Rurality, and Identity: Supporting Gifted Students through Place-based Curricula

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Runnin' with your cousins from yard to yard  
Livin' was easy but the playin' was hard  
Didn't have much, nothing comes for free  
All you needed was your family  
Country Girl  
Carolina Chocolate Drops

Rhiannon is a precocious, musical child. She has been creating music since she was young, often while gliding in the rocking chair in her grandmother's home in rural North Carolina. Rhiannon's parents divorced when she was young; she spent her formative years with her grandparents and singing in the local church. Rhiannon is drawn to the music and stories of Appalachia and plays the banjo and writes southern folk songs. She is 10-years-old and now lives with her mother and sister in Greensboro. Rhiannon's gifts lie predominantly in music, though she is also identified as academically gifted. She describes herself as withdrawn, not very social, and unpopular. She considers herself to be a "bookish nerd" and enjoys making clay models of video game characters. Rhiannon feels that she doesn't fit in with either the Black or White girls at school

because she is of mixed ethnicity: Black and Indigenous (Lumbee, Occaneechi, and Seminole) on her mother's side, and White on her father's.

Gloria, although young, is known for her opinions. Her family, who consists of her parents and six siblings, do not have a great deal of money, she opines that people are fine getting by with just a little. In rural Kentucky, where Gloria lives, the community lives off of the land and makes products that others typically purchase. For example, her Baba (grandmother) sews quilts, makes soap, churns butter, ferments wine, and keeps chickens. Gloria is 10 years old, and is a gifted reader, writer, and speaker. She writes poetry and recites her work for her church community. Gloria's community is impacted by a racial divide; her family is Black, and she attends school taught predominantly by Black women, with Black peers.

In this article, Rhiannon and Gloria's rural experiences will be used to recognize facets of their gifted identities that can best be supported through place-based curricula. Critical place-based education celebrates rural talented students' identities, challenges current social, political, and cultural biases and inequities (Grune-wald, 2003), and works to re-establish a vision of success for students in their rural places. At its heart, place-based education is hands-on, with real-world learning experiences, and connects rural students' classrooms with their communities and lives. Despite dominant narratives that claim rural places are places to leave (e.g. Theobald & Wood, 2010), a critical place-based curriculum enables gifted students to envision opportunities of success within their rural classrooms and places. After examining how race, rurality and intersectionality contribute to their cultural identity, place-based

star of david  
 tree of life  
 double wedding band  
 a nine patch  
 such patterns  
 once shaped our destiny  
 pieces of cloth  
 marking a woman's life  
 sewn together scraps  
 bits and pieces  
 tell us life stories  
 pieced by hand  
 remnants of passion  
 an unfulfilled desire  
 making peace  
 offering comfort  
 ways to warm  
 to open hearts  
*Appalachian Elegy: poem #56*  
*bell hooks*

curricula will be described as a support, with specific examples contextualizing Rhiannon and Gloria lived experiences.

### Rurality and Intersectionality

Rhiannon and Gloria are gifted rural students, but what is rural? How is it defined? It fully depends on who you ask. Within the United States, several definitions exist; the simplest definition coming from the US Census in 2015: *everything that's not urban*. Educational groups primarily use the definition offered by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES; National Center for Education Statistics, 2006), which uses an urban-centric locale system in four categories: city, urban, town, and rural. Rural is then divided into three subsets: fringe, distant, and remote. Like the census definition, the NCES categories are compared to urban clusters using distance as a reference point, see Table 1 for specific criteria.

Physical definitions provide context, but rurality is more complex than lines

on a map or clicks on an odometer. Cultural identity consists of several factors, in the same manner as ethnicity and gender. Ability and disability contribute to culture, as does geography, or place. In essence, your area influences who you are. Cultural concepts of rurality also extend beyond map borders. For example, Rhiannon who lives in proximity to Appalachia, but not within its borders, self-identifies with the Appalachian culture and expresses her deep cultural connections within her music. As noted by Miller and Brigandi, “contextual and nuanced descriptions that illustrate places and people, that transgress the static ‘rural’ oneness across places and time, and create an open and pluralistic conception of ‘ruralities’” (2020, in press) allow for a clearer delineation of rurality, in place and people, than geographic boundaries.

Rhiannon and Gloria are individuals with different stories: their families, upbringing, and talents are different. Yet, there are threads of similarity woven throughout. Richards and Stambaugh (2015) describe a sharedness in rurality, a rural essence that includes a sense of place, family, value of tradition, religion, and conceptions of success. Rhiannon and Gloria have a sharedness in their rural essence, their Blackness, and their giftedness, which also manifests in their intersectionality.

Individuals are composed of a complex web of identities. Intersectionality recognizes the various layers of a person's identities that are historically undervalued and oppressed and how these marginalized categories connect, overlap, and contribute to systemic discrimination and bias. Intersectionality is a critical lens for social justice work, particularly where race, gender, sexual identity, and class unite as gatekeepers against basic needs and rights, such as education, employment, health care, or fair immigration. Rhiannon and Gloria espouse this concept of

intersectionality: Gifted, Black, Rural. Rhiannon has a blended cultural and ethnic background, while Gloria's family experiences poverty; both girls experience additional, but different, layers of intersectionality. Affrilachian, a term coined by poet Frank X Walker, “def[ies] the persistent stereotype of a racially homogenized rural region...the Affrilachian Poets continue to reveal relationships that link identity to familial roots, socio-economic stratification and cultural influence, and an inherent connection to the land” (The Affrilachian Poets, n.d., para. 1). Both Rhiannon and Gloria might fit into this place-based intersectionality definition. More specific than rural and Black, it links to the nuanced rurality of the African American identity in the context of Appalachia.

Rhiannon and Gloria are also talented and academically gifted. Gifted rural education can best be approached through an equity-based, multicultural focus, and through culturally-responsive teaching, with components of philosophy, learning environment, curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Ford, 2015). Current practices in gifted education lean toward place-based education as a dynamic strengths-based approach to meet the needs of gifted learners.

### Gifted Rural Education: Place-Based

Place is simply defined as “spaces which people have made meaningful” (Cresswell, 2015, p. 12); however, happenings within places are multifaceted and temporal. Places are shaped by continual interactions and consequences within them in ecological, cultural, geographical, and economical spheres. No two places are alike, and everyone does not share the same experiences within place. A Black female identifying as queer experiences rural Appalachia is very different than a White male's heterogeneous experience.

Schooling, however, is often divergent from, and inconsequential to, placed realities and students' experiences and identities within places (Theobald & Wood, 2010). For example, how an Affrilachian fe-

**Table 1.** NCES Urban-Centric Rural Categories

Category	Distance from urban area (in miles)	Distance from urban cluster (in miles)
rural fringe	less than or equal to 5	less than 2.5
distant rural	between 5 and 25	between 2.5 and 10
remote rural	more than 25 miles	more than 10

male in rural Kentucky experiences school differs from how a Lumbee male in North Carolina experiences school. To combat this, educators who embrace a critical place-based pedagogy understand that “places are pedagogical” (Greunewald, 2003). Who students are, what they know, and how they come to know are largely due to their experiences and “being in place.” Exploring local places in the curriculum bridges students’ school, home, and community so that curriculum becomes meaningful and relevant.

Mainstream educational practices lack representation of anything but the urban or suburban reality; class and race are erased and anti-rural imagery is at the forefront (Theobald & Wood, 2010), propagating a stereotypical and marginalized view of an already minoritized community. Because of this, “(rural) youth see themselves as nonparticipants in the American experience” (Theobald & Wood, 2010, p. 27). Place-based curriculum is an essential practice, as it centers place as a strength and contextualizes the learning in the community. Critical elements of place-based curricula in gifted education include a focus on student identities, hands-on authentic experiences, positioning talented students to create a vision of success within their rural places, and encompassing, challenging, and stretching the concepts of current political, social, and cultural biases and inequities (Gruenewald, 2003).

### Place-Based Curricula Exemplars

Critically placed practices create inclusive classrooms that foster a sense of belonging and understanding so students like Rhiannon and Gloria “cannot only participate but also succeed in their education” (Jaekel, 2017, p. 134). Next, illustrative examples of place-based strategies and activities that consider each girl’s intersectionality and giftedness are provided.

### Rhiannon

Music is already deeply embedded in Rhiannon’s identity and lived experiences through the creation and presentation of music. To create space for her intersectionalities in her gifted classroom, she is given opportunities to explore Appalachian poems, music, and even local bands at a concert series, to critically assess how she, and/

or her family, is or is not represented in these verses. To facilitate a culture of inclusion, a lesson can be developed that addresses a whole class analysis, where all students are asked to critically reflect and discuss whose realities, identities, or lived experiences are forefronted or ignored in this artform. A point of class discussion must center around folk genres that grew from Black roots, are sown from the souls of gifted Black artists, but then are consumed predominantly by White audiences.

As a product, Rhiannon can write a song that illustrates her sense of self and her realities within her space (place). She can focus on her self-identity as an Affrilachian and as a female gifted student in a rural place. Rhiannon can then use her clay modeling interests to create a claymation video for her song. The video can then be shared in various local arenas such as her church, or as the curtain opener one afternoon at a local concert series.

### Gloria

Intentional placed-based curricular practices value collectivist and traditional ideals of Gloria’s culture and place inherent in her Affrilachian identity. Fostering Gloria’s inherent critical lens and budding self-expression in school repositions her not as inconsequential to learning, but as an active meaning maker in the curriculum.

As a whole class assignment, Gloria and her peers critically explore the spaces and places that are important to them, the spaces they feel safe, and do not feel safe. After mapping these spaces, Gloria can write a letter, or a poem, and critically analyzes and details why these places make her feel certain ways (Jaekel, 2017). Gloria can choose her form of expression as a way of becoming an active meaning maker in the classroom; other students will be able to use their own modalities. In culmination, Gloria will most likely create a visual that represents her identity within the places—this might include artifacts from her home or a pictorial and tasting of her grandmother’s home churned butter; hooks (2015) describes this identity within a space as homeplace. Gloria’s comfort in exploring this identity and her feeling of homeplace may come from the predominantly Black

school population and the school’s teachers. While we cannot recreate homeplace in the classroom, we can provide an inclusive space to share the power of homeplace in a space that is often indifferent to cultural and racialized ways of knowing and being.

### Conclusion

Gifted learners have special needs that require accommodations so that their potential is met. Intersectionality adds a layer of strengths that the student brings to the classroom, along with prospective challenges. The gifted rural learner benefits from depth, complexity, modifications, and/or accommodations to the curriculum to ensure that their gifts are realized. Place-based curriculum is one such method embedded in the locale that spotlights the strengths of rurality and meets the individualized needs of the gifted learner in a dynamic rather than deficit approach.

The vignettes in this article were loosely based on real gifted, rural, and Black individuals. Some aspects of their stories were slightly adjusted in order to construct a vignette appropriate for this article; the facts were based on the resources below. Rhiannon is a member of the Carolina Chocolate Drops and a successful solo artist: Rhiannon Giddens. Gloria is author, professor, and cultural icon: Gloria Jean Watkins, generally known by her pseudonym, bell hooks. **THP**

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## curriculum café

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process so that ideas may be captured on paper and organized in a productive way for future use.

### • Tracking feelings and thoughts over time

The journaling technique can act as a time capsule that allows students to see how their thinking changes and what that implies about learning. Thus the use of journaling as a regular part of the routine of the classroom can encourage such behavior.

Journaling reflects personal relevance, providing an effective way for gifted students to connect self and context. It is the perfect tool for the current climate. **THP**

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