

RURAL EDUCATION

*A Critical Study of the Objectives and
Needs of the Rural Elementary School*

BY

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Rural Education Series

RURAL EDUCATION

RURAL EDUCATION SERIES

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

RURAL education transcends in importance any other phase of American education. Eleven million children, or just half the public school enrollment of the United States, are in one-teacher and hamlet schools. In term, attendance, and curriculum; in teaching, supervision, and high school opportunity; in equipment, organization, and expenditure; in every known factor of school efficiency and progress, these eleven million children are lamentably handicapped and neglected. For them the per capita expenditure for educational purposes is \$24 annually, while for city children the same figure is \$40. For them also the annual school term averages thirty-eight days shorter than in cities, which means, in the large, that country children have an actual elementary school period of only six years, whereas urban children under better teachers and better conditions have eight years.

But this is not all. Even the meagre terms supported for rural children are but poorly conducted and less well attended. Country children lose 28 per cent of the *seven* months' school term provided for them. Urban children lose less, only 21 per cent of the *nine* months' term provided in cities. So great is this handicap that illiteracy is twice as bad in rural areas as in urban districts, and child labor among rural children three times as frequent as among urban children. Because of the

heavy toll of manual labor upon the young people of the farms, high school advantages for rural youth have been sadly neglected and are estimated to be but one sixth as generous as those provided for urban youth.

Even worse is the teaching situation in rural schools. Just half the rural teachers of the United States, or 150,000, have never completed a four-year high school. Ten per cent, or 30,000, have finished only the eighth grade. Only two per cent are normal school graduates, and 15,000, chiefly in negro rural schools, are not more than sixth grade product.

Contributing still further to the menace of this situation is the scarcity and inefficiency of rural school supervision. Only twelve states provide professionally prepared supervisors for rural schools, while the whole problem is still further complicated in twenty-nine of our forty-eight states through the political election of county superintendents on a basis of partisan politics.

Most serious of all these handicaps, however, is the false philosophy of rural elementary education which has unconsciously pervaded our thinking on the rural school problem. Those engaged in this work must have realized for some time that there are two schools of thought in their chosen field. The first of these has been well characterized as that of the "radical rural-ites." Members of this group would, either consciously or unconsciously, vocationalize the rural elementary school, limit it to the contacts and ideals of the immediate community, select its teaching content in terms of adult needs, reduce its responsibility for perpetuating the world's best social inheritance, and so restrict and "blinder" country children as to force them of neces-

sity, through ignorance or compulsion, into farming as a life vocation.

Diametrically opposed to these are the advocates of the more liberal school. Members of this group see grave dangers in the practices just described and are working consistently toward a larger opportunity and freedom of life for country children. They believe unquestionably "that the rural child has an equal right with any other child and that any attempt to keep him in the country through limited suggestion or overemphasis upon rural material is autocratic." In the practical applications of this theory they advocate for country children, as for all others, the best possible development of the standard American school system with its three specific stages of elementary grades, junior high school, and senior high school. These divisions of the public school they would characterize for country children as well as for city children by their respective functions of offering: in the first, a basic background for American citizenship; in the second, exploratory opportunities for the discovery of individual aptitude and fitness; and in the senior high school, and in it only, a preparation for specific and definite vocations. Much of the whole difficulty revealed by this study may be traced, in fact, to the failure to define these three stages of public democratic education, and particularly to a confusion of the chief functions of the elementary school and the senior high school.

Nor are these distinctions merely nominal. Separating the two groups thus defined is a fundamental difference in the philosophy of education which is of profound significance to the future welfare of American life and

world democracy, both urban and rural. So serious is this situation that the time has come for a careful clarifying of thought, a redefinition of aims and objectives, and a frank checking up of some of our practices in the light of modern development and democratic striving. Toward this end Dr. Brim has made a notable contribution — one which will challenge the attention and approval of all real students of rural education and take first rank as a fundamental guide in the thought and philosophy of the rural field. If he has been a little severe upon those quoted (among whom even the editor of this series has not escaped), it has all been done in a spirit of sincerity and service and will, it is hoped, be accepted in the same spirit.

This volume introduces a series, then, which is new in fact and philosophy, as well as in name. The chief underlying purpose of those responsible for the presentation of the series is threefold:

1. To focus attention upon the needs of rural schools and assist in the remedy and alleviation of their conditions.
2. To correct the false philosophy for American education so frequently revealed in the quotations submitted through Dr. Brim's study.
3. To aid teachers and supervisors in the concrete application and practice of more democratic principles in better keeping with our national ideals and traditions.

The series will include only books bearing rather broadly but specifically upon the problems of rural education. The determining factor in the approval of each volume will be its fitness for meeting some imme-

diating vital need of the rural education field. Among the early contributions of the series will be a text in rural school management, a discussion of nature study, a book on the rural school curriculum, and a volume on rural school supervision.

In conclusion the editor wishes to invite comments and suggestions on this series or any volume in it from those engaged in rural education. Only in this way, through frank discussion and cordial coöperation on the many problems of our complicated and varied task, can real progress be made, and educational justice assured to the thousands of children involved.

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PREFACE

A SURVEY of the proposed objectives for rural elementary education found in educational writings, and a study of tendencies in curriculum revision, in the reorganization of rural schools, and in the preparation of rural teachers, reveal wide differences of opinion. Most of these proposals and tendencies imply that the rural elementary school is responsible (1) for preserving a sufficiently large rural population to supply food for the world and sustain a standard rural civilization; (2) for giving country children a definite preparation for the social and vocational demands of rural life; and (3) for solving the many neglected social, religious, recreational, and occupational problems of the adult rural group. These purposes demand that the rural elementary school emphasize rural opportunity, that it give preparation for specific local tasks, and that the problems, needs, and interests of the adult and of the local community should determine the problems and content of the rural elementary curriculum.

A minority oppose this position. They see the task of rural elementary education as that of elementary education in general, that is, as the problem of socializing the child in the largest possible sense, and of providing for him the essential conditions of growth¹ and social service. Their conception of the purpose of elementary education implies that the elementary school

¹ Growth is used here with the meaning given it by Dewey in his *Democracy and Education*.

should strive to put children in touch with the many varied interests of men, their forms and conditions of living, their problems and needs, and to develop in these young lives a spirit of sympathy and coöperation with the peoples of other groups. This aim would foster in the child many varied interests as a basis of growth, and prepare him to choose intelligently among these interests for his particular field of social service. It would make available to him the rich resources of the social heritage so that he may acquire the means of individual growth and social membership; and it would furnish for him the social life and atmosphere essential to the development of these characteristics.

It is possible for the rural elementary school to serve somewhat each and all of these various proposed ends without conflicting with individual and social welfare. But when any of the local or limited purposes named above is made the primary objective for the elementary school, or a determining factor in the educational procedure, rural education fails to meet the demands placed upon it. Some of these limited purposes may be legitimate ends for the older children often found in the rural elementary school. These are of secondary school age, and preparation for vocational efficiency has a place in secondary education. It has no place, however, in elementary education, and this presence of the adolescent boy and girl in the rural elementary school necessitates great caution to avoid sacrificing the general education of the elementary child to the more specific, local, and vocational interests of the older group.

It is the purpose of this study to evaluate the various proposals enumerated above, to show the danger and

inadequacy of any program that would vocationalize rural elementary education, and to indicate the implications of this question for education. Part One presents, through quotations, the varying suggested purposes, needs, and proposals which have been advanced for rural elementary education. These differences of purpose as herein expressed demand a consideration of the fundamental principles of individual development and of social stability and progress. Consequently, Part Two attempts to state the principles of "the good life" in its individual aspects; that is, to determine the conditions in which an individual finds his greatest growth and satisfaction. It also considers the same question in relation to the welfare of society as a whole. Part Three makes an analysis of the rural environment in the light of the demands of "the good life" in order to determine the needs of rural life, especially with reference to the child. Chapters IX to XII in Part Four then show the bearing of the general principles of individual growth and social progress and of these consequent rural needs on the curriculum, method, and organization of the rural school and upon the teacher's service in the field of community development and occupational life; while Chapter XIII makes a similar application to the problem of rural-teacher preparation.

The author takes this opportunity of acknowledging his indebtedness and gratitude to his instructors, friends, and associates among the faculty and graduate students of Teachers College, whose helpful advice and encouragement have contributed very largely to whatever merit the book may possess.

ORVILLE G. BRIM.

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