

THE VISITOR

Devoted to the Interests of Agricultural Education in Minnesota Schools

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SOME PROBLEMS IN RURAL EDUCATION

I. Why Rural Life Problems Merit Consideration

The importance of a social problem cannot be appreciated fully unless one knows how many people are affected by the conditions considered. If this criterion of numbers is accepted as a valid one, then the importance of problems of rural life can be conclusively established.

The Federal Census of 1920 gives the population of the United States and Minnesota as follows:

	United States	Minnesota
Total	105,000,000	2,387,125
Urban	54,000,000	1,056,593
Village	9,000,000	368,269
Hamlets and Open		

Country	42,000,000	967,263
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The per cents of the different classifications for the United States are: Urban, 51.4; village, 8.6; hamlets and open country, 40. For Minnesota the per cents are: urban, 44.1; village, 15.4; hamlets and open country, 40.5.

The statistics given above indicate clearly that the problems of rural life, whatever they may be, merit careful and extensive consideration because so many people are involved in their solution.

II. Education a Rural Life Problem

The Commission of Country Life, appointed by President Roosevelt in 1908, was perhaps the greatest single stimulus in focusing attention on the problems of rural life and agriculture. Although it dealt with many technical questions and economic problems, the chief and underlying interest was the human aspect of agriculture, namely, the influence of rural conditions upon country life. In the report, the Commission stated that "the subject of paramount importance in our correspondence and in the hearings is education. . . . It is recognized that all difficulties resolve themselves in the end into a question of education."¹

In practically every attempt to enumerate the essential problems of rural life, rural education is included as an outstanding one. This is true whether the economic, social, or cultural phases are considered, or whether the "production" or "consumption" point of view is stressed. The Land-Grant colleges de-

veloped under the Morrill Act of 1862, the establishment of experimental stations at each of the colleges of agriculture and mechanic arts in accordance with the Hatch Act of 1887, the extension instruction and practical demonstrations given under the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, the vocational education stimulated by the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 are sufficient evidence that production in agriculture is dependent in some measure on education. The other point of view is expressed very pointedly in the following quotation: "Education is far more important than increases in money wages in raising the standard of life. The material standard of life can never rise above the psychic standard. Education creates new sets of wants. . . . Without education, China and India can never materially raise their standard of life; without education, the farmer cannot expect to maintain farm prices which will maintain a higher standard of life."²

III. Educational Philosophy and Rural Education

Although there is practical unanimity among leaders of rural life concerning the importance of education, there have been and still are conflicting points of view regarding the legitimate objectives of organized elementary education in the rural schools. Five distinct and outstanding functions may be recognized from an analysis of the literature in this field. These have been set forth by Mr. Jensen as follows:

- I. (A) Emphasis: To train boys and girls so that they will stay on the farm.
(B) Result: The development of a distinct peasant class of rural people.
- II. (A) Emphasis: To furnish training for vocational (agricultural) efficiency.
(B) Result: Efficient producers of farm products.
- III. (A) Emphasis: To prepare for a satisfying or richer rural life.
(B) Result: Good farmers who are happy and contented to live in the country.

¹ Report of the Commission on Country Life, p. 121. New York, Sturgis and Walter Company, 1911.

² Hawthorn, H. B. The Sociology of Rural Life, p. 97. New York, The Century Company.

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IV. (A) Emphasis: To prepare for general efficiency and community service.

(B) Result: Efficient citizens of the community.

V. (A) Emphasis: Training for broad citizenship.

(B) Result: Efficient citizenship of society as a whole.

"The rural people, who are more interested in the problem of elementary education in the rural schools than anyone else, most emphatically reject the idea of using the rural school as a means of keeping the children on the farm.

"The rural people reject, also, with but little emphasis, the vocational efficiency, the richer rural life, and the community service theories as fundamental in the purposes of the rural school.

"The rural people express their emphatic approval of the broadest possible theory—citizenship of society as a whole—as the fundamental, only worth-while purpose of the elementary education in the rural school.⁴

IV. Problems of Rural Education

The need for a wisely planned and definitely organized program to attack the problems peculiar to rural education is generally recognized. The educational opportunities of the rural child are, in the main, regarded as inferior to those offered to the urban child. The opinion prevails that the rural schools have failed to adapt themselves to the changed environment and to the newer conceptions of education.

"Our rural schools are still in a marked degree the products of tradition and local environment. They served very well during the pioneer days when the district school was the center of local community interest and progress. They have not, however, kept pace with the advancement of educational standards and requirements. They do not provide the girls and boys on the farm an equal chance

³Jensen, A. S. "Rural Opinion of Educational Philosophy"; *The Journal of Rural Education*, November, 1925.

for an elementary and high school education comparable with that afforded boys and girls of the cities and villages. That the child in the country should have, as far as possible, equal educational opportunities with the urban child, no one will dispute."⁴

At one of the meetings of the Country Life Association, the problems of rural education were grouped under the following heads:⁵

"1. Re-organization of the course of study; 2. Preparation of an adequate supply of trained teachers; 3. Provision of a suitable school plant; 4. Provision of high school opportunities for all children without the severing of home ties; 5. Development of systems of school supervision; 6. Business-like administration of school affairs in state and local units; 7. Provision of adequate financial support, involving an equalization of the burden of taxation and also state and federal aid.

The methods by which these things may be accomplished are:

"1. Consolidation; 2. Better school buildings; 3. School homes or teacherages; 4. Adequate salaries for teachers; 5. Better organization of counties and states for the administration of education."⁶ 6. Readjustment of school support; 7. Adult education; for immigrants, illiterates, and for farmers and their wives through extension work in agriculture, home economics, etc."

Two conditions important in the solution of the problems of rural education are not commonly recognized. It has been pointed out in several studies that in many counties, even in some states, the amount of taxable property back of each rural child exceeds that back of each urban child.⁶ But more important than the wealth is the income. The farmer's income during the period following the World War has been, indeed, very low. "American agriculture since the slump of 1920 has not yielded a commercial interest return on its invested capital or a fair wage for the average farm operator and his family. . . . If out of the total agricultural income, farmer-owned capital were credited with earnings at a rate equal to that which investments in farm loan bonds receive, the reward left for management and labor operators was \$932 per operator and fam-

⁴ Report of the Interim Committee on Education, *Journal of the House, Minnesota Legislature*, 43rd Session, Jan. 25, 1923, p. 9.

⁵ Proceedings of the Country Life Association, Vol. 1, p. 15-24.

⁶ Burris, B. J. *The County School System; How Organized and Administered*; Educational Bulletin No. 73, State Department of Education, Indiana, 1924.

ily in 1919-20, \$399 in 1920-21, \$292 in 1921-22, \$454 in 1922-23, and \$520 in 1923-24."⁷

"The agricultural depression is primarily due to two factors: first, the disparity between farm prices and prices of things that farmers buy; second, the disparity between farm prices and payment of taxes, interest, and debts."⁸

In order to improve rural education, more money must be spent for it. This the farmer feels at present unable to do. Not only has the purchasing power of his dollar shrunk, but the obligations incurred when money was cheap must be paid on a greatly reduced income. The economic status of agriculture is an essential factor in rural education.

The second condition often overlooked is the relative number of children of the different age groups. The following tables, taken from the Reports of the census of 1920, illustrate the situation:

For the United States

Age Group	Per Cent of Total Urban Population	Per Cent of Total Rural Population
Under 5 years.....	9.7	12.3
5 to 14 years.....	17.9	24.0
15 to 44 years.....	50.9	43.5
45 years and over...	21.3	20.2

For Minnesota

Age Group	Per Cent of Total Urban Population	Per Cent of Total Rural Population
Under 5 years.....	9.8	11.9
5 to 9 years.....	9.0	11.5
10 to 14 years.....	8.1	12.2
15 to 19 years.....	8.1	10.0
20 to 44 years.....	43.7	34.9
45 years and over...	21.2	20.4

Properly interpreted, the tables indicate that for every 1,000 people in urban Minnesota there are 252 between the ages of 5 and 19, inclusive, to be educated, and that out of every 1,000 rural people there are 337 or 85 more of the same age asking for an education. Back of the 252 urban children are 649 adults, while back of the 337 rural children there are but 553, or 96 less. There are 2.57 adults for each urban child between 5 and 19, inclusive, and only 1.64 adults for each rural child between the same ages. It should not be necessary to point out further that the relatively larger number of rural children to be educated places an additional burden on the farmer.

⁷ Information Service, Jan. 3, 1925, Department of Research and Education, Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, New York.

⁸ Warren and Pearson. *The Agricultural Situation*, p. 1. New York, The Macmillan Co.

V. Methods of Solution

Perhaps the most important problem in rural education not directly connected with the expenditure of more money is that of determining the proper unit for purposes of administration and supervision. After discussing the advantages and disadvantages of the common school district, the union school district, the associated school district, the township, the town, the village and city, the consolidated district, the community district and the county as possible local school units, Butterworth states: "We should select that unit, whatever it may be, that will (1) provide the facilities for an effective school system, and (2) bring people and groups together in such combinations as will provide a stimulating integration of those persons and groups. . . . The judgment of the writer is that present conditions justify different local units even in the same state."⁹

Minnesota has done what Mr. Butterworth believes is justified by present conditions, namely, adapted organization to existing conditions. Although the ordinary district system prevails in most of the state, in five counties (Beltrami, Cass, Koochiching, Lake of the Woods, St. Louis) there are large areas, known as the "unorganized territory" administered and supervised in accordance with the county plan. The ten-township districts with their central high schools (Deer River, Grand Rapids, Tower, Two Harbors) from the view point of area, administration and supervision are similar to the county systems of Maryland.

The two definite trends in rural education in Minnesota are, however, (1) the consolidation of the common school districts into larger units and (2) the improvement of the common district schools to their maximum efficiency.

The advantages unanimously claimed for consolidation by leaders in rural education lay in:¹⁰

"1. Greater specialization on the part of teachers; 2. An enriched curriculum. This includes the extra-curricular activities as well as the so-called special subjects; 3. A broader social environment for the pupils; 4. Better adaptation to the individual differences of pupils due to the advantages enumerated above; 5. An unbroken course from the kindergarten and primary grades through the high school."

⁹ Butterworth, J. E. *Rural School Administration*, p. 108. New York, The Macmillan Co., 1926.

¹⁰ Unpublished Study by C. G. Sargent and G. A. Selke.

Two additional advantages are claimed for consolidation by a considerable number of educators:

1. The establishment of better centers for adult educational and social activities; 2. The integration of neighborhoods into better defined communities.

The advocates of consolidation urge the merging of larger areas than formerly. In order to gain the advantages claimed for consolidation, it is necessary to have sufficient financial and human resources to make the establishment of a secondary school practicable and economical.

The state surveys indicate that the work of the larger rural schools, even in the elementary field, is superior to that of the small schools.

"The inferiority of the small rural school is apparent. . . . The larger rural schools (four teachers or more) approximate the achievement of the city schools."¹¹

"The superior results achieved in the larger elementary schools, both rural and city, are an unanswerable argument for consolidation."¹²

"Whatever the detailed cause may be, the fact remains that the one-teacher school is a less productive educational institution than is the larger school unit."¹³

Studies made by O'Brien and Smart in Kansas,¹⁴ by Morrison in New York,¹⁵ and by Foote¹⁶ produce additional evidence that the work of pupils in the larger rural schools is more efficient than that of pupils in the one-teacher school.

With better achievement in the elementary field and, in the better type of consolidation, the advantages of a secondary school, one may rightly ask why the one-teacher school persists. The chief obstacles in the way of consolidation are:

1. The increased cost of education.

When better education conditions are obtained they must be paid for.

2. The persistency of the tradition of the district school.

¹¹ The Virginia Survey, 1919, pp. 129-130.

¹² Public Education in North Carolina, p. 76. National Achievement, p. 223.

¹³ Rural School Survey of New York Edu-

¹⁴ O'Brien and Smart, "Schooling in One-Teacher Schools"; Journal of Rural Education, November, 1921.

¹⁵ Morrison, J. C. "Comparative Study of Instruction in Consolidated and One-Room Rural Schools in New York State," Journal of Rural Education, April, 1922.

¹⁶ Foote, J. M. "A Comparative Study of Instruction in Consolidated and One-Teacher Schools"; Journal of Rural Education, April, 1923.

3. The difficulties of transportation which involve control, cost, roads and distance.

There are those who feel that the common criticisms of the one-teacher school are unfair. Mr. Boraas states that "Almost anyone concerned with the promotion of education could stand up and recite fluently and by heart the conventional Jeremiah about rural schools. It goes something like this:

"A little group of little children in a little house, with little equipment, taught by a little woman with little training, little experience, little ambition, little supervision, for little pay, and with little profit, among a people who have little faith in rural life."¹⁷

Many of the defects so often pointed out in connection with the one-teacher school are not necessarily inherent characteristics. The small school may provide modern physical conveniences, it may be taught by a competent teacher, the term may be long and the attendance good. Children may even be transported to it. Its work can be supervised efficiently. In other words, good one-teacher schools may be established and maintained.

Mr. Pittman¹⁸ has shown what supervision can do under existing conditions. Colling¹⁹ demonstrated what a project curriculum, carefully guided and supervised, may accomplish. Mr. Powell²⁰ states: "With highly qualified teachers, with expert supervisors and a live community willing to spend its money, we need not fear greatly for the rural school boys and girls, even under present organization, despite the obvious desirability of school consolidation."

The important question regarding the improvement of the one-teacher school is whether the better educational advantages offered there will be as expensive as if offered through consolidation. However, the issue is that of better rural education, not of consolidation or non-consolidation. Where the former is feasible and acceptable to the people, it should be established; where it is not practicable, the one-teacher school should be developed to its maximum efficiency.

G. A. S.

¹⁷ Boraas, J. Unique Aspects of Rural School Methods. American Educ. Digest, p. 324.

¹⁸ Pittman, Marvin. The Value of Supervision. Baltimore, Warwick and York.

¹⁹ Collins, Ellsworth. An Experiment with a Project Curriculum.

²⁰ Powell, R. W. "The Case of the One-Teacher School"; Journal of Rural Education, October, 1924.