

**GEORGE
HERBERT
BETTS**

NEW IDEALS IN RURAL
SCHOOLS

George Herbert Betts

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George Herbert Betts

New Ideals in Rural Schools

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

In presenting a second monograph on the rural school problem in this series we register our sense of the importance of rural education. Too long have the rural schools suffered from neglect. Both the local communities and the State have overlooked the needs of the rural school system. At the present hour there is an earnest awakening of interest in rural life and its institutions. Already there is a small but certain movement of people toward the country and the vocation of agriculture. A period of agricultural prosperity, the reaction of men and women against the artificialities of city life, the development of farming through the application of science, and numerous other factors have made country life more congenial and have focused attention upon its further needs. It is natural, therefore, that the rural school should receive an increased share of attention.

Educational administrators, legislators, and publicists have become aware of their responsibility to provide the financial support and the efficient organization that is needed to develop country schools. The more progressive of them are striving earnestly to provide laws that will aid rather than hamper the rural school system. In his monograph on *The Improvement of the Rural School*, Professor Cubberley has done much to interpret current efforts of this type. From the standpoint of state administration he has contributed much definite information and constructive suggestion as to how the State shall respond to the fundamental need for (1) more money, (2) better organization, and (3) real supervision for rural schools.

It is not so clear, however, that rural patrons, school directors, and teachers have become fully aware of their duty in the matter of rural school improvement. To be sure much has been done by way of experiment in many rural communities; but it can scarcely be said that rural communities in general are thoroughly awake to the importance of their schools. The evidence to the contrary is cumulative. The first immediate need is to reawaken interest in the school as a center of rural life, and to suggest ways and means of transmuting this communal interest into effective institutional methods. To this end, Professor Betts has been asked to treat the rural school problem from a standpoint somewhat different from that assumed by Professor Cubberley; that is, from the point of view of the local community immediately related to, and concerned with, the rural school. In consequence his presentation emphasizes the things that ought to be done by the local authorities,—parent, trustee, and teacher. Its soundness may well be judged by the pertinent order of his discussion. Having stated his problem, he initiates his discussion by suggesting how the social relations of the school are to be reorganized; only later does he pass to the detail of curricula and teaching methods. It is a clear recognition of the fact that the community is the crucial factor in the making of a school. The State by sound fiscal and legislative policies may do much to make possible a better country school; but only the local authorities can realize it. The trained teacher with modern notions of efficiency may attempt to enlarge the curriculum and to employ newer methods of teaching, but his talents are useless if he is hampered by a conservative, unappreciative, and indifferent community. When the school becomes a social

center of the community's interest and life, there will be no difficulty in achieving any policy which the State permits or which a skilled teacher urges. Scattered schools will be consolidated, and isolated ungraded schools will be improved. Given an interested community, the modern teacher can vitalize every feature of the school, changing the formal curriculum into an interesting and liberalizing interpretation of country life and the pedantic drills and tasks of instruction into a skillful ministry to real and abiding human wants.

PREFACE

No rural population has yet been able permanently to maintain itself against the lure of the town or the city. Each civilization at one stage of its development comprises a large proportion of rural people. But the urban movement soon begins, and continues until all are living in villages, towns, and cities. Such has been the movement of population in all the older countries of high industrial development, as England, France, and Germany. A similar movement is at present going on rapidly in the United States.

No great social movement ever comes by chance; it is always to be explained by deep-seated and adequate causes. The causes lying back of the rapid growth of our cities at the expense of our rural districts are very far from simple. They involve a great complex of social, educational, and economic forces. As the spirit of adventure and pioneering finds less to stimulate it, the gregarious impulse, the tendency to flock together for our work and our play, gains in ascendancy. Growing out of the greater intellectual opportunities and demands of modern times, the standard of education has greatly advanced. And under the incentive of present-day economic success and luxury, comfortable circumstances and a moderate competence no longer satisfy our people. Hence they turn to the city, looking to find there the coveted social, educational, or economic opportunities.

It is doubtful, therefore, whether, even with improved conditions of country life, the urbanization of our rural people can be wholly checked. But it can be greatly retarded if the right agencies are set at work. The rural school should be made and can be made one of the most important of these agencies, although at the present time its influence is chiefly negative. With the hope of offering some help, however slight, in adjusting the rural school to its problem, this little volume is written by one who himself belongs to the rural community by birth and early education and occupation.

G. H. B.

Cornell College, February, 1913.

I

THE RURAL SCHOOL AND ITS PROBLEM

The general problem of the rural school

The general problem of the rural school is the same as that of any other type of school—to render to the community the largest possible returns upon its investment in education with the least possible waste. Schools are great education factories set up at public expense. The raw material consists of the children of succeeding generations, helpless and inefficient because of ignorance and immaturity. The school is to turn out as its product men and women ready and able to take up their part in the great world of activities going on about them. It is in this way, in efficient education, that society gets its return for its investment in the schools.

The word "education" has in recent years been taking on a new and more vital meaning. In earlier times the value of education was assumed, or vaguely taken on faith. Education was supposed to consist of so much "learning," or a given amount of "discipline," or a certain quantity of "culture." Under the newer definition, education may include all these things, but it must do more; it *must relate itself immediately and concretely to the business of living*. We no longer inquire of one how much he knows, or the degree to which his powers have been "cultivated"; but rather to what extent his education has led to a more fruitful life in the home, the state, the church, and other social institutions; how largely it has helped him to more effective work in a worthy occupation; and whether it has resulted in greater enjoyment and appreciation of the finer values of personal experience,—in short, whether for him education spells *efficiency*.

We are thus coming to see that education must enable the individual to meet the real problems of actual experience as they are confronted in the day's life. Nor can the help rendered be indefinite, intangible, or in any degree uncertain. It must definitely adjust one to his place, and cause him to grow in it, accomplishing the most for himself and for society; it must add to the largeness of his personal life, and at the same time increase his working efficiency.

This is to say that one's education must (1) furnish him with the particular *knowledge* required for the life that he is to live, whether it be in the shop, on the farm, or in the profession. For knowledge lies at the basis of all efficiency and success in whatever occupation. Education must (2) shape the *attitude*, so that the individual will confront his part of the world's work or its play in the right spirit. It must not leave him a parasite, whether from wealth or from poverty, ready to prey upon others; but must make him willing and glad to do his share. Education must (3) also give the individual training in *technique*, or the skill required in his different activities; not to do this is at best but to leave him a well-informed and well-intentioned bungler, falling far short of efficiency.

The great function of the school, therefore, is to supply the means by which the requisite *knowledge, attitude, and skill* can be developed. It is true that the child does not depend on the school alone for his knowledge, his attitude, and his skill. For the school is only one of many influences operating on his life. Much of the most vital knowledge is not taught in the school but picked up outside; a great part of the child's attitude toward life is formed through the relations of the home, the community, and the various other points of contact with society; and much of his skill in doing is developed in a thousand ways without being taught. Yet the fact remains that the school is organized and supported by society to make sure about these things, to see that the child does not lack in knowledge, attitude, or skill. They must not be left to chance; where the educative influences outside the school have not been sufficient, the school must take hold. Its part is to supplement and organize

with conscious purpose what the other agencies have accomplished in the education of the child. The ultimate purpose of the school is *to make certain of efficiency*.

The means by which the school is to accomplish these ends are (1) the *social organization* of the school, or the life and activities that go on in the school from day to day; (2) the *curriculum*, or the subject-matter which the child is given to master; and (3) the *instruction* or the work of the teacher in helping the pupils to master the subject-matter of the curriculum and adjust themselves to the organization of the school.

These factors will of necessity differ, however, according to the particular type of school in question. It will therefore be necessary to inquire into the special problem of the rural school before entering into a discussion of the means by which it is to accomplish its aim.

The special problem of the rural school

Each type of school has not only its general problem which is common to all schools, but also its special problem which makes it different from every other class of schools. The special problem of any type of school grows out of the nature and needs of the community which supports the school. Thus the city school, whose pupils are to live the industrial and social life of an urban community, confronts a different problem from that of a rural school, whose pupils are to live in a farming community. Each type of school must suit its curriculum, its organization, and its instruction to the demands to be met by its pupils. The knowledge taught, the attitudes and tastes developed, and the skill acquired must be related to the life to be lived and the responsibilities to be undertaken.

The rural school must therefore be different in many respects from the town and city school. In its organization, its curriculum, and its spirit, it must be adapted to the requirements of the rural community. For, while many pupils from the rural schools ultimately follow other occupations than farming, yet the primary function of the rural school is to educate for the life of the farm. It thus becomes evident that the only way to understand the problem of the rural school is first to understand the rural community. What are its industries, the character of its people, their economic status, their standards of living, their needs, their social life?

The rural community is industrially homogeneous. There exists here no such a diversified mixture of industries as in the city. All are engaged in the same line of work. Agriculture is the sole occupation. Hence the economic interests and problems all center around this one line. The success or failure of crops, the introduction of a different method of cultivation or a new variety of grain, or the invention of an agricultural implement interests all alike. The farmer engaged in planting his corn knows that for miles around all other farmers are similarly employed; if he is cutting his hay or harvesting his grain, hundreds of other mowing machines and harvesters are at work on surrounding farms.

This fund of common interest and experience tends to social as well as industrial homogeneity. Good-fellowship, social responsiveness and neighborliness rest on a basis of common labor, common problems, and common welfare. Like-mindedness and the spirit of coöperation are after all more a matter of similar occupational interests than of nationality.

Another factor tending to make the rural community socially more homogeneous than the city community is its relatively stable population, and the fact that the stream of immigration is slow in reaching the farm. It is true that the European nations are well represented among our agricultural population; but for the most part they are not foreigners of the first generation. They have assimilated the American spirit, and become familiar with American institutions. The great flood of raw immigrants fresh from widely diverse nations stops in the large centers of population, and does not reach the farm.

The prevailing spirit of democracy is still another influence favoring homogeneity in the rural community. Much less of social stratification exists in the country than in the city. Social planes are not so clearly defined nor so rigidly maintained. Financial prosperity is more likely to take the direction of larger barns and more acres than of social ostentation and exclusiveness.

America has no servile and ignorant peasantry. The agricultural class constituting our rural population represents a high grade of natural intelligence and integrity. Great political and moral reforms find more favorable soil in the rural regions than in the cities. The demagogue and the "boss" find farmers impossible to control to their selfish ends. Vagabonds and idlers are out of place among them. They are a hard-headed, capable, and industrious class. As a rule, American farmers are well-to-do, not only earning a good living for their families, but constantly extending their holdings. Their farms are increasingly well improved, stocked, and supplied with labor-saving and efficient

machinery. Their land is constantly growing in value, and at the same time yielding larger returns for the money and labor invested in it.

The standard of living is distinctly lower in farm homes than in town and city homes of the same financial status. The house is generally comfortable, but small. It is behind the times in many easily accessible modern conveniences possessed by the great majority of city dwellers. The bath, modern plumbing and heating, the refrigerator, and other kindred appliances can be had in the country home as well as the city. Their lack is a matter of standards rather than of necessity. They will be introduced into thousands of rural homes as soon as their need is realized.

The possibilities for making the rural home beautiful and attractive are unequalled in the city for any except the very rich. It is not necessary that the farmhouse shall be crowded for space; its outlook and surroundings can be arranged to give it an æsthetic quality wholly impossible in the ordinary city home. That this is true is proved by many inexpensive farmhouses that are a delight to the eye. On the other hand, it must be admitted that a large proportion of farmhouses are lacking in both architectural attractiveness and environmental effect. Not infrequently the barns and sheds are so placed as to crowd the house into the background, and the yards for stock allowed to infringe upon the domain of the garden and the lawn. All this can be easily remedied and will be when the æsthetic taste of the dwellers on the farm comes to be offended by the incongruous and ugly.

No stinting in the abundance of food is known on the farm. The farmer supplies the tables of the world, and can himself live off the fat of the land. Grains, vegetables, meats, eggs, butter, milk, and fruits are his stock in trade. If there is any lack in the farmer's table, it is due to carelessness in providing or preparing the food, and not to forced economy.

While the farming population in general live well, yet many tables are lacking in variety, especially in fruit and vegetables. Time and interest are so taken up with the larger affairs of crops and stock, that the garden goes by default in many instances. There is no market readily at hand offering fruit and vegetables for sale as in the city, and hence the farm table loses in attractiveness to the appetite and in hygienic excellence. It is probable that the prosperous city workman sits down to a better table than does the farmer, in spite of the great advantage possessed by the latter.

The population of rural communities is necessarily scattering. The nature of farming renders it impossible for people to herd together as is the case in many other industries. This has its good side, but also its bad. There are no rural slums for the breeding of poverty and crime; but on the other hand, there is an isolation and monotony that tend to become deadening in their effects on the individual. Stress and over-strain does not all come from excitement and the rush of competition; it may equally well originate in lack of variety and unrelieved routine. How true this is is seen in the fact that insanity, caused in this instance chiefly by the stress of monotony, prevails among the farming people of frontier communities out of all proportion to the normal ratio.

Farming is naturally the most healthful of the industrial occupations. The work is for the greater part done in the open air and sunshine, and possesses sufficient variety to be interesting. The rural population constitutes the high vitality class of the nation, and must be constantly drawn upon to supply the brain, brawn, and nerve for the work of the city. The farmer is, on the whole, prosperous; he is therefore hopeful and cheerful, and labors in good spirit. That so many farmers and farmers' wives break down or age prematurely is due, not to the inherent nature of their work, but to a lack of balance in the life of the farm. It is not so much the work that kills, as the *continuity of the work* unrelieved by periods of rest and recreation. With the opportunities highly favorable for the best type of healthful living, no inconsiderable proportion of our agricultural population are shortening their lives and lowering their efficiency by unnecessary over-strain and failure to conform to the most fundamental and elementary laws of hygienic living, especially with reference to the relief from labor that comes through change and recreation.

The rural community affords few opportunities for social recreations and amusements. Not only are the people widely separated from each other by distance, but the work of the farm is exacting,

and often requires all the hours of the day not demanded for sleep. While the city offers many opportunities for choice of recreation or amusement, the country affords almost none. The city worker has his evenings, usually Saturday afternoon, and all day Sunday free to use as he chooses. Such is not the case on the farm; for after the day in the field the chores must be done, and the stock cared for. And even on Sunday, the routine must be carried out. The work of the farm has a tendency, therefore, to become much of a grind, and certainly will become so unless some limit is set to the exactions of farm labor on the time and strength of the worker. It separates the individual from his fellows in the greater part of the farm work and gives him little opportunity for social recreations or play.

One of the best evidences that the conditions of life and work on the farm need to be improved is the number of people who are leaving the farm for the city. This movement has been especially rapid during the last thirty years of our history, and has continued until approximately one half our people now live in towns or cities. Not only is this loss of agricultural population serious to farming itself, creating a shortage of labor for the work of the farm, but it results in crowding other occupations already too full. There is no doubt that we have too many lawyers, doctors, merchants, clerks, and the like for the number of workers engaged in fundamental productive vocations. Smaller farms, cultivated intensively, would be a great economic advantage to the country, and would take care of a far larger proportion of our people than are now engaged in agriculture.

All students of social affairs agree that the movement of our people to towns and cities should be checked and the tide turned the other way. So important is the matter considered that a concerted national movement has recently been undertaken to study the conditions of rural life with a view to making it more attractive and so stopping the drain to the city.

Middle-aged farmers move to the town or city for two principal reasons: to educate their children and to escape from the monotony of rural life. Young people desert the farm for the city for a variety of reasons, prominent among which are a desire for better education, escape from the monotony and grind of the farm life, and the opportunity for the social advantages and recreations of the city. That the retired farmer is usually disappointed and unhappy in his town home, and that the youth often finds the glamour of the city soon to fade, is true. But this does not solve the problem. The flux to the town or city still goes on, and will continue to do so until the natural desire for social and intellectual opportunities and for recreation and amusement is adequately met in rural life.

Farming as an industry has already felt the effects of a new interest in rural life. Probably no other industrial occupation has undergone such rapid changes within the last generation as has agriculture. The rapid advance in the value of land, the introduction of new forms of farm machinery, and above all the application of science to the raising of crops and stock, have almost reconstructed the work of the farm within a decade.

Special "corn trains" and "dairy trains" have traversed nearly every county in many States, teaching the farmers scientific methods. Lecturers on scientific agriculture have found their way into many communities. The Federal Government has encouraged in every way the spread of information and the development of enthusiasm in agriculture. The agricultural schools have given courses of instruction during the winter to farmers. Farmers' institutes have been organized; corn-judging and stock-judging contests have been held; prizes have been offered for the best results in the raising of grains, vegetables, or stock. New varieties of grains have been introduced, improved methods of cultivation discovered, and means of enriching and conserving the soil devised. Stock-breeding and the care of animals is rapidly becoming a science. Farming bids fair soon to become one of the skilled occupations.

Such, then, is a brief view of the situation of which the rural school is a part. It ministers to the education of almost half of the American people. This industrial group are engaged in the most fundamental of all occupations, the one upon which all national welfare and progress depend. They control a large part of the wealth of the country, the capital invested in agriculture being more than double that invested in manufactures. Agricultural wealth is rapidly increasing, both through the rise

in the value of land and through improved methods of farming. The conditions of life on the farm have greatly improved during the last decade. Rural telephones reach almost every home; free mail delivery is being rapidly extended in almost every section of the country; the automobile is coming to be a part of the equipment of many farms; and the trolley is rapidly pushing out along the country roads.

Yet, in spite of these hopeful tendencies, the rural community shows signs of deterioration in many places. Rural population is steadily decreasing in proportion to the total aggregate of population. Interest in education is at a low ebb, the farm children having educational opportunities below those of any other class of our people. For, while town and city schools have been improving until they show a high type of efficiency, the rural school has barely held its own, or has, in many places, even gone backward. The rural community confronts a puzzling problem which is still far from solution.

Certain points of attack upon this problem are, however, perfectly clear and obvious. *First*, educational facilities must be improved for rural children, and their education be better adapted to farm life; *second*, greater opportunities must be provided for recreation and social intercourse for both young and old; *third*, the program of farm work must be arranged to allow reasonable time for rest and recreation; *fourth*, books, pictures, lectures, concerts, and entertainments must be as accessible to the farm as to the town. These conditions must be met, not because of the dictum of any person, but because they are a fundamental demand of human nature, and must be reckoned with.

What, then, is the relation of the rural school to these problems of the rural community? How can it be a factor in their solution? What are its opportunities and responsibilities?

The adjustment of the rural school to its problem

As has been already stated, the problem of any type of school is to serve its constituency. This is to be done through relating the curriculum, the organization, and the teaching of the school to the immediate interests and needs of the people dependent on the school for their education. That the rural school has not yet fully adjusted itself to its problem need hardly be argued.

It has as good material to work upon in the boys and girls from the farm as any type of schools in the country. They come of good stock; they are healthy and vigorous; and they are early trained to serious work and responsibility. Yet a very large proportion of these children possess hardly the rudiments of an education when they quit the rural school. Many of them go to school for only a few months in the year, compulsory education laws either being laxly enforced or else altogether lacking. A very small percentage of the children of the farm ever complete eight grades of schooling, and not a large proportion finish more than half of this amount.

This leaves the child who has to depend on the rural school greatly handicapped in education. He has but a doubtful proficiency in the mechanics of reading, and has read but little. He knows the elements of spelling, writing, and number, but has small skill in any of them. He knows little of history or literature, less of music, nothing of art, and has but a superficial smattering of science. Of matters relating to his life and activities on the farm he has heard almost nothing. The rural child is not illiterate, but he is too close to the border of illiteracy for the demands of a twentieth-century civilization; it is fair neither to the child nor to society.

The rural school seems in some way relatively to have lost ground in our educational system. The grades of the town school have felt the stimulus of the high school for which they are preparing, and have had the care and supervision of competent administrators. The rural school is isolated and detached, and has had no adequate administrative system to care for its interests. No wonder, then, that certain grave faults in adjustment have grown up. A few of the most obvious of these faults may next claim our attention.

The rural school is inadequate in its scope. The children of the farm have as much need for education and as much right to it as those who live in towns and cities. Yet the rural school as a rule never attempts to offer more than the eight grades of the elementary curriculum, and seldom reaches this amount. It not infrequently happens that no pupils are in attendance beyond the fifth or the sixth grade. This may be due either to the small number of children in the district, or, more often, to lack of interest to continue in school beyond the simplest elements of reading, writing, and number. It is true that certain States, such as Illinois and Wisconsin, have established a system of township high schools, where secondary education equal to that to be had in the cities is available to rural children. In other States a county high school is maintained for the benefit of rural school graduates. In still others, arrangements are made by which those who complete the eight grades of rural schools are received into the town high schools with the tuition paid by the rural school districts. The movement toward secondary education supplied by the rural community for its children is yet in its infancy, however, and has hardly touched the larger problem of affording adequate opportunities for the education of farm children.

The grading and organization of the rural school is haphazard and faulty. This is partly because of the small enrollment and irregular attendance, and partly because of the inexperience and lack of supervision of the teacher. Children are often found pursuing studies in three or four different grades at the same time. And even more often they omit altogether certain fundamental studies because they or their parents have a notion that these studies are unnecessary. Sometimes, owing to the small number in attendance, or to the poor classification, several grades are entirely lacking, or else they are maintained for only one or two pupils. On the other hand, classes are often found following each other at an interval of only a few weeks, thereby multiplying classes until the teacher is frequently

attempting the impossible task of teaching twenty-five or thirty classes a day. Children differing in age by five or six years, and possessing corresponding degrees of ability, are often found reciting in the same classes. That efficient work is impossible under these conditions is too obvious to require discussion.

The rural schools possess inadequate buildings and equipment. The average rural schoolhouse consists of one room, with perhaps a small hallway. The building is constructed without reference to architectural effect, resembling nothing so much as a large box with a roof on it. It is barren and uninviting as to its interior. The walls are often of lumber painted some dull color, and dingy through years of use. The windows are frequently dirty, and covered only by worn and tattered shades. There is usually no attempt to decorate the room with pictures, or to relieve its ugliness and monotony in any way. The library consists of a few dozens of volumes, not always supplied with a case for their protection. Of apparatus there is almost none. The work of the farm is done with efficient modern equipment, the work of the farmer's school with inadequate and antiquated equipment.

While the length of the school year is increasing in the rural districts, *the term is yet much shorter than in town and city schools.* Many communities have not more than six months of school, and few more than eight. This shortage is rendered all the more serious by the irregular attendance of the rural school children. A considerable amount of absence on the part of the younger ones is unavoidable under present conditions when the distance is great and the weather bad. After all allowance is made for this fact, however, there is still an immense amount of unnecessary waste of time through non-attendance. Many rural schools show an average attendance for the year of not more than sixty per cent of the enrollment. Going to school is not yet considered a serious business by many of the rural patrons, and truant officers are not so easily available in the country as in the city.

In financial support the rural school has of necessity been behind the city school. Wealth is not piled up on a small area in agricultural communities as is the case in the city. It would often require square miles of land to equal in value certain city blocks. But making full allowance for this difference, the farmers have not supported their schools as well as is done by the patrons of town and city schools. The school taxes for rural districts are much lower than in city districts, in most instances not more than half as high. It is this conservatism in expenditure that is responsible for many of the defects in the rural school, and particularly for the relatively inefficient teaching that is done. The rural teachers are the least educated, the least experienced, and the most poorly paid of any class of our teachers. They consist almost wholly of girls, a large proportion of whom are under twenty years of age, and who continue teaching not more than a year or two. Not only is this the case, but effective supervision of the teaching is wholly impossible because of the large area assigned to the county or district superintendent of rural schools. In no great industrial project should we think of placing our youngest and most inexperienced workers in the hardest and most important positions, and this without supervision of their work.

The rural school has not, therefore, yet been adjusted to its problem. It has a splendid field of work, but is not developing it. Our farming population have capacity for education and need it, but they are not securing it. There is plenty of money available for the support of the rural school, but the school is not getting it. Enough well-equipped teachers can be had for the rural schools, but the standards have not yet required adequate preparation, nor the pay been sufficient to warrant extensive expenditure for it.

In the rural school is found the most important and puzzling educational problem of the present day. If our agricultural population are not to fall behind other favored classes of industrial workers in intelligence and preparation for the activities that are to engage them, the rural school must begin working out a better adjustment to its problem. Its curriculum must be broader and richer, and more closely related to the life and interests of the farm. The organization of the school, both on the intellectual and the social side, must bring it more closely into touch with the interests and needs of the rural community. The support and administration of rural education must be improved. Teachers for

the rural schools must be better educated and better paid, and their teaching must be correspondingly more efficient. The following pages will be given to a discussion of these problems of adjustment.

II

THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF THE RURAL SCHOOL

Every school possesses two types of organization: (1) an *intellectual* organization involving the selection and arrangement of a curriculum, and its presentation through instruction; and (2) a *social* organization involving, on the one hand, the inter-relations of the school and the community, and on the other the relations of the pupils with each other and the teacher.

The rural school and the community

The rural school and community are not at present in vital touch with each other. The community is not getting enough from the school toward making life larger, happier, and more efficient; it is not giving enough to the school either in helpful coöperation or financial support.

In general, it must be said that most of our rural people, the patrons of the rural school, have not yet conceived education broadly. They think of the school as having fulfilled its function when it has supplied the simplest rudiments of reading, writing, and number. And, naturally enough, the rural school has conceived its function in the same narrow light; for it is controlled very completely by its patrons, and a stream cannot rise higher than its source.

Because of its isolation, the pressing insistence of its toil, and the monotony of its environment, the rural community is in constant danger of intellectual and social stagnation. It has far more need that its school shall be a stimulating, organizing, socializing force than has the town or city. For the city has a dozen social centres entirely outside the school: its public parks, theatres, clubs, churches, and streets, even, serve to stimulate, entertain, and educate. But the rural community is wanting in all these social forces; it is lacking in both intellectual and social stimulus and variety.

One of the most pressing needs of country districts is a common neighborhood center for both young and old, which shall stand as an organizing, welding, vitalizing force, uniting the community on a basis of common interests and activities. For while, as we have seen, the rural population as a whole are markedly homogeneous, there is after all but little of common acquaintanceship and mingling among them. Thousands of rural families live lives of almost complete social isolation and lack of contact with neighbors.

This condition is one of the gravest drawbacks to farm life. The social impulse and the natural desire for recreation and amusement are as strong in country boys and girls as in their city cousins, yet the country offers young people few opportunities for satisfying these impulses and desires. The normal social tendencies of youth are altogether too strong to be crushed out by repression; they are too valuable to be neglected; and they are too dangerous to be left to take their own course wholly unguided. The rural community can never hope to hold its boys and girls permanently to the life of the farm until it has recognized the necessity for providing for the expression and development of the spontaneous social impulses of youth.

Furthermore, the social monotony and lack of variety of the rural community is a grave moral danger to its young people. It is a common impression that the great city is strewn thick with snares and pitfalls threatening to morals, but that the country is free from such temptations. The public dance halls and cheap theaters of the city are beyond doubt a great and constant menace to youthful ideals and purity. But the country, going to the opposite extreme, with its almost utter lack of recreation and amusement places, offers temptations no less insidious and fatal.

The great difficulty at this point is that young people in rural communities are thrown together almost wholly in isolated pairs instead of in social groups; and that there are no objective resources of amusement or entertainment to claim their interest and attention away from themselves. They are freed from all chaperonage and the restraints of the conventions obtaining in social groups at the very time in their lives when these are most needed as steadying and controlling forces. The result is that the country districts, which ought to be of all places in the world the freest from temptation and peril to the morals of our young people, are really more dangerous than the cities. The sequel is found in the fact that a larger proportion of country girls than of city girls go astray. Nor is the rural community more successful in the morals of its boys than its girls. In other words, the lack of opportunities for free and normal social experience, the consequent ignorance of social conventions, and the absence of healthful amusement and recreation, make the rural community a most unsafe place in which to rear a family.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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