

THE SCHOOL AND THE RURAL ENVIRONMENT

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1. "We are fumbling around in education because we know so little about the future and do not know enough about the past." However pertinent or otherwise these words of Robert Ulrich were in 1947 they are certainly very relevant to the educational issues of school education in all those countries which are seeking to develop their education systems in the confident belief that education is the keystone to accelerated socio-economic development. In that belief during the present decade enormous efforts have been made to multiply and diversify the provision of school education and some striking efforts have been made to relate the curriculum more specifically to the presumed needs of the country. Much has been said about the need and many attempts have been made to relate the educational effort to manpower requirements. Much has been written about the importance of cultural considerations and about education for change. But the most optimistic observer of the results of the celebration and the action taken can hardly claim that there is much to be optimistic about. The education provided is still criticised as too bookish, the pleas that education should be directed in such a manner as to stay the drift from the land are still to be heard with disturbing persistence. Remarks made towards the end of the last century about the inadequacies of the educational effort were echoed and re-echoed in twenties, the thirties and the forties of this century and are still commonplace in the reports of commissions, committees, consultants and of many of those who with little or no justification set themselves up as judges of and commentators on the educational scene. What then are the facts, what the problems and along what paths lie the prospects of constructive advance?

2. The situation in the primary schools can quickly be described. In all essentials they are little different now from what they were twenty-five years ago. Few schools have been built to designs based upon analysis of the functions which go on inside them. In too many instances they are little more than rectangular boxes, with the minimum of furniture and equipment.

Their maintenance is dependent upon inadequate financial provision which has to be supplemented by local voluntary effort. Pupils still lack the necessary minimum equipment in the form of textbooks and reading materials, The content of the syllabuses reflect the subject-orientated structure inherited very largely from the British tradition of the nineteenth century.

Whatever may be objectives as defined in official statements, the work of the schools is dominated by the interests of the minority who will proceed to secondary education, namely success in the selection examinations for admission to the secondary school. The situation is better in a few schools, for instance demonstration schools attached to training colleges, international schools serving special interests, schools supported by industrial interests.

3. With few exceptions the teachers engaged in the primary schools are ill equipped both in academic knowledge, practical and professional skills for the tasks they are expected to carry out. A considerable proportion of them have had no professional training. Such supervision as they may receive is spasmodic, unsystematic and frequently non-constructive. The inspector's visit is still too often regarded as a visitation to be feared rather than as an opportunity for getting professional help. For the younger and better qualified teachers the reactionary attitudes of headmasters and school managers too often have a suffocating effect. Even where the resources of the mass media have been introduced the lack of attention to the conditions of reception, the lack of, and the inadequacy of teacher preparation for responding to the new resources vitiates the development that might be expected.

4. Despite the fact that the schools in many cases have now become local authority schools or are controlled by the central government, the participation of the local community in the affairs of the school is, with few exceptions, limited to finding supplementary sources of income or to providing voluntary labour. The attempts on the part of administrations to inform the public about the policy and objectives are perfunctory, negligible or mis-directed. Anxiety about the drift from the land has resulted in persistent demands that the curriculum of the rural schools should be redesigned in order to prevent the drift. Over the last fifty years many efforts have been made to provide an education which will keep the young people on the land. School gardens, school farms, environmentally based syllabuses, agricultural science as a school certificate subject, post-primary land settlement projects, all these approaches have been attempted, modified, dropped, reintroduced, and for the most part with disappointingly

poor results. From Buxton's concept of "the Bible and the Plough" through the Phelps-Stokes Commission concept of adaptation to President Nyerere's "education for self reliance" and the stream of memoranda and reports emanating from official sources, the theory of education being related to the socio-economic environment has been consistently expressed. Attempts at putting the theories into practice have not been lacking. There were, it is true, the early efforts of the White Fathers at Bagamoyo, the Scottish Missionaries at Calabar, the adoption of the Jeannes Schools concept in Central Africa, and, currently, Van Rensburg's highly individual efforts in Botswana to relate the school to the community.

5. The still popular myth that the education provided is too bookish and is based on a non-practical curriculum is not easily sustained when the facts are organised. It would be easy to review the past efforts from country to country and to produce an impressive catalogue of experiments and projects which were intended to relate education to the environment. Such a catalogue, however, would be little more than grist for a sterile polemical mill. But what would be important would be to discover the parent and pupil responses. For most of the communities in touch with the school system the purpose of education was, and still is, to gain salaried employment for their children on leaving school. Among the arguments used with effect by Bishop Shanahan in Nigeria to convince villagers of the value of education, was that European business and government had given rise to new opportunities for Africans as clerks and interpreters. But apart from such propaganda the high cash value of education was unmistakably clear to people as trade and administration impinged upon their daily lives. As European administrations took more effective control the link between education and opportunities for employment became more clear. The administrators needed men who could read and write, the missions needed teachers and clergy, businesses needed accountants, produce buyers and salesmen. The idea of education as an investment was recognised and pursued by Africans long before the economists made it a feature in the theory of education for development. With the concept of education as an investment clearly established in the minds of parents, the response to the form of education provided was, and still is, adjusted to what appears to be the best investment for the success of the family and the individual. The hard facts, were, that a literary education was more likely to be fruitful than a manual, vocational or agricultural education. The dignity of labour has little meaning if the rewards are deemed to be inadequate. Even when the changing economic conditions

have debased the currency of the literary education as, for instance, when a primary school leaving certificate is no longer a sufficient qualification for employment in the clerical or semi-clerical sectors, the belief in the link between certificate and job persists. The shortage of the desirable jobs does not of itself lead to farming becoming an acceptable alternative; for the individual there is always the possibility that he will be the lucky one to gain a place in the salary earning sector of society. To the significance of public opinion in this respect neither educationists, administrators, nor politicians have given serious attention. However wise we might be in identifying the components that make up an adequate education, unless that adequacy is recognised, understood and accepted by the public the response to what is provided will put the best of projects into jeopardy.

6. Apart from the possible mutual advantage to be gained from certain kinds of education as opposed to others, people recognise that some kinds of education provided greater opportunity of exercising power and authority. Education provides a man with the means of exploiting others as well as being of service. The farmers who cannot check the price lists are at the mercy of the produce buyer's agent. The man who is dependent upon someone else to interpret the printed instructions or regulations is at the mercy of dishonest officials. Administration is a more powerful field of influence than is a professional service career. In societies undergoing rapid economic, social and political change, aspirations are influenced by such considerations. If any kind of education gives advantages over other kinds of education in this way, then the shrewdest and ablest will seek ways and means of getting the education they deem appropriate.

7. The lesson that we have to learn from history in this respect, if we will, is that planning the provision, content and organisation of education to satisfy any overall objective without regard for the actualities of the socio-economic conditions, and without full appreciation of the purposes of education as understood by the mass of the people, is likely to prove ineffective. It may well be that the objectives and the plans for meeting them are wisely chosen, but of themselves they will not necessarily lead to success. In every case it is essential to accompany any educational reform with a programme of community education.

8. But to turn to our more immediate concern, namely, the formal school system in the rural community, it is necessary for us to examine what is involved with special attention

to agricultural development. In doing so it must be recognised that agricultural development is but one element in the over-all development. The movement from subsistence farming through market farming to industrialised agriculture is linked to the rate of development from a peasant economy to an industrial economy. This is a process which in past developments has been characterised by agricultural change following industrial change. In Western countries it is a process which has been going on over three centuries and which can be expressed in generalised terms as Malassis (1) has done by reference to population movement from agricultural to industrial employment. In the eighteenth century in Europe 80% of the population were engaged in agriculture and 20% in non-agricultural activities. In the nineteenth century the distribution became 50% agricultural and 50% non-agricultural activities, in the early part of the twentieth century the proportions were 20% in agriculture and 80% in non-agricultural activities, and currently 10% are engaged in agriculture and 90% in non-agricultural activities. It is unlikely that the rate of change will be anything like so prolonged in Africa, for apart from the political determination to accelerate development, the increasing integration of national and international economics provides a further accelerating force.

9. This means that education must be a process of educating for mobility. The belief that the purpose of the curriculum in the rural schools, whether primary or secondary, is to educate for rural living and that the provision of such education will help to stabilise the population is a fallacy. Industrialisation of agriculture and increasing industrialisation of the processing of the natural resources will continue to stimulate mobility and will make the need of a good general education for all increasingly important. Increasing industrialisation will, however, make it even more imperative that all must understand the nature of the natural environment and man's dependence upon the conservation of the land and its wise use of food production. From this point of view I would suggest that any policy which is based upon the idea that children in rural communities should learn agricultural skills as an integral part of their general education is a mistake. What passes for agricultural education in the primary school results neither in effective farming practice, nor in understanding of agriculture as an essential part of the economy.

10. Agriculture as a way of life, outside subsistence farming, requires someone who wants to buy the farm products, someone through whom the products can be sold, and someone who will produce the crops and animal products. In other words, in so

(1) L. Malassis, 'Development Economique et Industrialisation de l'Agriculture', *Economique Appliquee*, Archives de L'ISEA, Vol. XXI, 1968, p.4.

far as agriculture has a place in the primary school curriculum, it should involve providing knowledge and an understanding of agriculture as an activity demanding the co-operation of people with a variety of skills. I suggest that the primary school pupil who leaves school with the understanding that this approach offers is more likely to have some confidence in farming as a way of life than does the school leaver whose agricultural education has consisted of inadequate exercises in school gardening and watered down theories about plant physiology, rotating crops and the use of fertilizers.

11. Learning the basic skills of gardening and farming in a rural community is almost certainly better done in the traditional way of participation in the family activities than in the intermittent attempts of school farming. In so far as the school has a contribution to make, it is better made by co-operating with the family in their gardening and farming than by separate "school farming". If, with the support and co-operation of the family, pupils can be encouraged to carry out under supervision projects involving improved practices on family land and keep appropriate records from the initiation of the project through to the harvesting and sale of the produce, they are much more likely to appreciate problems and possibilities of farming developments. Furthermore such a procedure is much more likely to bring about fruitful relations between school and the community than is obtained from what, at present in most instances, passes for agricultural education. But the effectiveness of this or any other approach in giving 'agriculture' a place in the curriculum of the rural school will depend upon the competence of the teacher as a teacher and as a public relations officer. Furthermore, it will depend upon the readiness of the education officers, school managers, headmasters and the other teachers to collaborate and relate the rest of the school activities to the rhythm of the seasons. Too often the present organization of the school year and the school timetables militates against such collaboration. Instead of rural studies being the poor relation of the other subjects of the school curriculum, it must be recognised as an activity in which school, home and community come together. Instead of the teacher responsible for rural studies being regarded as a person of dubious qualifications and status, he must be so trained and equipped that he commands respect by the importance of the impact of his work on the parents as well as on the pupils. Instead of parent-associations meetings being somewhat artificial gatherings on the occasion of prize givings or school concerts, or occasions merely

to persuade parents help meet school deficits, school-parent relations should be built on the reality of parents and teachers sharing in the education of the children. In this sphere both have something to give which is directly pertinent to the life of the local community. Since farming is the backbone of rural life, it is of course important that children should be acquainted with the realities of current practice and the natural rhythm of the farming year. But, it is more important that they should come to an understanding of the requirements for agricultural development than to master those farming practices presently in use but soon to be put out of date. This presents a dilemma not easy to resolve. Indeed it cannot be resolved by the school alone.

12. The rural school programme must be linked with the farm development programme for the adults. The starting point for this element of integration lies not in the school itself but in the education of the farmers. It is essential that "farmer education" should take place where the farmers are, that is to say on their farms, and in their home villages. It must be directed to the farmers' current interests and needs, that is, how to increase and improve crop and livestock production, how to improve marketing and the margin between costs and returns.

13. Whatever specific unit of demonstration or instruction is being undertaken in the local community, there should be a counterpart programme at the appropriate time in the school. An example will illustrate my meaning. When the campaign was launched in Ghana to eradicate the swollen shoot disease and to encourage cocoa farmers to adopt spraying techniques to control capsid bugs and other carriers of disease to the cocoa trees, a programme was devised for both the primary and secondary schools. Two broadsheets were prepared which provided lesson material dealing with all aspects of the cocoa industry, its history, geography, economy and the appropriate elements of the botany of the cocoa plant. After the adult campaign was launched the schools were instructed to make a special feature of the study of the cocoa industry for one week. In planning the material for the primary and secondary levels attention was paid to the relative maturity of the pupils. At a time when the whole adult community was being approached on the subject by every available means of communication, and with attention to the particular interests of the different sectors of the community, in the schools the topic was dealt with in such a manner as to bring out the relevance of the cocoa industry to the survival and growth of the society. It provided a common

area of education for the young and the old. The occurrence of such national events are not frequent, but when they do occur there needs to be a corporate effort between the interested departments. At the local level such events are more common. Where agriculture or forestry extension services are systematically identifying projects for local programmes the education authorities should be apprized of them and collaborative activities should be planned and executed.

14. Turning from the primary school to the secondary school the issues are somewhat different. And here it is necessary to differentiate between the day secondary school in the rural areas and the boarding schools. The degree of school and local community co-operation possible where the school is a day school is different from that possible where the school is a boarding institution. In the former the majority of the pupils are likely to be from local families. In the latter, the majority of pupils are likely to be from families living outside the range of daily contact with the school. Therefore, there cannot be the same degree of co-operation between the school, home and neighbourhood in respect of the boarding school as there can be in respect of the day school. The home-farm pupil project approach suggested for use in primary schools cannot be effectively organised in the boarding schools.

15. But certain factors are common to day and boarding secondary schools in rural areas. They are concerned with the teaching of more systematised bodies of knowledge than are the primary schools. In the upper levels there is the beginning of specialisation, leading towards the first stages of vocational education. For those who are likely to go on to some form of further education the choice of subjects for study is in part determined by entry qualification requirements. For those who consider the possibilities of professional training in agriculture, the appropriate specialisation in the secondary school is not agriculture but the natural sciences and mathematics. In so far as the secondary school curriculum should include consideration of agriculture and the rural environment it should be an extension of general education about agriculture and the cognate subjects. This element of general education should be common for all in the first stages of secondary education. Whereas in the day secondary schools the home-farm project approach may still be possible for those who are considering agriculture as a possible way of life, this is not so in the case of the rural boarding school. For the boarding school the project approach involves the provision of facilities

for individual activities integrated with the school farm as a productive unit of the school plant. This is also necessary because school holidays frequently cut across vital procedures in the rhythm of husbandry.

16. For both the primary and the secondary school it is of the first importance to remember that a proper acquaintance with agricultural practice and analysis of selected experiences in connection with its development are likely to be more fruitful than ill-conceived attempts at comprehensive coverage of a watered down agriculture syllabus. Secondly, it must be recognised that laying foundations to both theory and practice of agriculture, and that is all schools can attempt, is a very different thing from providing vocational and professional training in agriculture. Many past failures and disappointments are due to the fact that school programmes have been pale imitations of vocational and professional training schemes. The weakness here has derived from the training the teachers have or have not received.

17. So far our considerations have been focused on the agricultural component of the rural environment and school practice in relation to it. The school-community relationship has been touched upon and also the agricultural content. But there are other aspects of the school in the rural environment which deserve attention.

18. One matter of serious import that affects the rural primary school is that selection for admission to secondary schools is determined by examinations which completely ignore the rural environment and any element of the school syllabus which reflects the rural environment and agriculture. With the best will in the world neither pupils, teachers nor parents are likely to take seriously the teaching of knowledge and skills which are seen to be totally irrelevant to satisfying the aspirations which dominate their interests at the first critical point in the careers of the children. However, to treat it as an examination subject is unlikely to improve the situation. Rather it will reduce agriculture to yet another rote-learning exercise, with the contents confined to the examinable data, presented in a way likely to produce good examination results.

19. This stricture applies with equal force to attempts at localising social studies. So long as selection for admission to secondary education is necessary and so long as the selection is based solely on examination performance, limited to certain skills and a body of knowledge which put local environmental

studies and activities at a discount, pupils, parents and teachers will give little heed to exhortations, syllabuses and even instructions to relate education to the environment.

20. The school in most communities is still seen to be a means of escaping from the rural environment and not as an institution to assist in changing the environment.

21. One of the ways suggested for integrating the school more fully into the local community is to make the village or district the focal point of all educational effort. This is an attractive idea which has had its counterpart in other situations. The primary school in Britain in the first three decades of this century was so used, evening classes for adults, local recreational and entertainment activities being organised in the local school buildings. In the Cambridge Village Colleges this idea was more fully developed. But the effectiveness of this line of approach is dependent upon the capacity and readiness of the people to respond to it. It also requires provision of furnishings and equipment appropriate to the needs of the different users, a provision that may prove too burdensome for many budgets. Even when such multi-purpose use of the local school is adopted it will not necessarily lead to the school functioning any better as an institution for bringing old and younger nearer to an understanding of each other or of the demands and opportunities of the changing society.

22. If the school is to become a more satisfactory social institution, equipping the young with the knowledge and skills for the morrow, whilst helping to maintain relative equilibrium between the past and the present, it must be realised that the teachers and the adult members of the community must understand what education and social change is about.

23. In these terms the reference to the word 'teacher' includes the teacher in the classroom responsible for the education of the children, the agricultural extension officer, health worker and any other professional workers concerned with adult education.

24. When the work of all these people is seen to be part of a single process, that of educating the community for change, and when their separate trainings are co-ordinated or at least based upon those elements of objectives that are held in common, and when machinery exists to ensure co-ordination of effort whenever it is appropriate, then the concept of the school integrated into the community will become feasible.

25. If this all too condensed an assessment of past experience and current needs is valid, then we must be prepared to experiment in new ways with our school and adult education programmes. It will not lead to any miraculous panacea for the ills, nor immediately solve the problems that beset us. Progress, at least initially, will be slow. There have been attempts in the past to co-ordinate the training of different types of worker, but they have added up to little more than a sharing of facilities and some sharing of instruction. Furthermore, this joint training should have been followed by allocating teams made up from people trained together, to a district or a community with a specific programme to be pursued in co-operation. The working out of such programmes will have many problems and complications, but could be attempted if there is the faith, will, and determination to pursue such projects.

26. An immediately practicable attack on the problem would be to select a district which by its geographical and human unity would lend itself to a team approach. The administrative service and educational authorities, together with the local representative bodies, would first have to identify items in the local development programme which possessed common and parallel elements and then determine what measures would have to be taken in respect of the content of the programme for the different sectors of the community. Thereafter, the methods of communication most appropriate for each sector should be chosen, the timing of the several operations determined, and the ways of effective co-operation should be assessed. Such a project would involve a good deal of collaboration at different levels in the community. It might well be necessary to conduct short training courses to ensure that the participants in the different sectors know the facts and skills to be taught and the techniques of instruction the particular communications require. The local school might well be the focal point of the work. The concept of the school as a service centre enunciated by Mrs, Helen Coppen in her paper Educational Media for the Development of Rural Education (Conference Document CRE (70) A/4) is particularly relevant to such a project.

27. Any significant extension of the approach suggested here would call for radical changes in the training programmes. It would also call for re-orientation in the approach to curriculum reform and development in the schools and give more point to the demands for systematic in-service training for teachers. The functions of the inspectorate and school supervisors would have to be reviewed.

28. I suspect that at this point, if I have succeeded in holding your attention, many of you may have decided that this is revolutionary nonsense, or remembering my professional status, that I am engaged upon ivory-towered speculations. To which I would reply that after fifty years of good intentions, and, for the most part, abortive attempts to relate the school and the community, there may be some justification in a revolution. In fact there is nothing very revolutionary in any of it. Many of the past efforts have had one or more elements of this approach in them. What has been lacking in the past has been a consistently co-operative effort over a long enough period. Eight things are required:

- (a) There must be a clear understanding of the nature of the school as a social institution which is influenced by and in turn influences the other social institutions. This means that the educational policy and the programme for implementing it cannot be treated in isolation if it is to make its appropriate contribution to socio-economic development.
- (b) Effective integration of the school as an institution with the other local social institutions will involve positive social education of the adult members of the community.
- (c) There must be much more flexibility in the structure and the process of formal education and it must be much more informed by the specific educational efforts in local development.
- (d) All the people involved in the education process, administrators, teachers, and the local adult community, must co-ordinate their efforts. This will involve re-thinking the training programmes of teachers, extension workers and the like.
- (e) If the school is to become community centred it will be necessary to rethink the design and equipment of the school.
- (f) The significance of the rural environment and the fundamental character of agriculture is the first priority in the education programme in the school but it must be accepted that vocational training is not appropriate to general education at either the primary or the secondary level.

- (g) A project approach to an integrated programme in selected districts is probably the most useful immediate step that can be taken to bring about an understanding of how best to integrate the school and the rural community.
- (h) Any attempt to carry out such a programme will involve re-examination of the content and methods of the education provided, and of ancillary matters such as selection for further education and supervisory activities.

29. These reflections have been concerned with the problems of the school in the rural environment. But it must be recognised that they apply too, albeit in a different fashion, to the urban environment. All children should learn about the growth of plants and animals, how food is produced and marketed. All need to have a general understanding of how agriculture, industry and the social services are interlinked, All communities need to be involved in the educational process of the community both for the young and the old. And it must be clearly understood that the machinery of education is only as effective as are the executive agents. These are the teachers, whether in the classroom, the farm demonstration unit, the health clinic or the discussion group in the market place or under a tree.

30. The past record of partial attempts and failure to integrate the school with the community and to relate the education provided to the interests of the rural communities suggests that development efforts need to be re-orientated. If as is suggested, ignorance of critically important factors have prejudiced success in the past, then it is clear that particular types of study, investigation and pilot projects are necessary.

31. In the past there has been failure to appraise correctly in advance the responses particular projects and measures were likely to elicit. These responses can be assessed only in the light of all the interrelated factors, social and economic as well as environmental.

32. In the past the incentives provided have not been related to the aspirations of the people for their children. Furthermore insufficient attention has been given to the qualifications, skills, knowledge and the attitudes of the people involved when attempting to relate the school to the community and the environment.

33. There is need for research to identify the constraints, social, administrative, economic and professional that have inhibited past and current attempts to relate the school and the community.
34. The training and education of all concerned must be such that they become characteristically receptive to change.
35. Much more effort must be made to establish a habit of co-operation, by harnessing the 'sense of community' characteristic of African society to the service and the exploitation of the new institutions.
36. A solution to the problems of mobilizing, training and utilizing the human resources in the community must be found and ways discovered of inspiring an effective team approach to the education of the adults and children in the community.
37. And not least in importance is the need for conviction on the part of all concerned for a concerted and persistent effort based upon an appreciation of the role of the school as providing (1) a general education, (2) understanding of the fundamental values upon which the stability of society is dependent, and(3) the dependence upon the land and the links between agriculture and industry.
38. In order to bring about these necessary changes, there must be an end to departmental rivalries, so that planning and executive action can be integrated at ministerial, regional and district levels. At the same time the adult community itself will have to be educated to respond with understanding co-operation.
39. Crucial to the success of such a plan to change the rural school is the training of the teachers in the schools and the extension workers, in agriculture, forestry, the health services, community development and social welfare.