



ARTICLE

Enhancing the Rural Option: An International Perspective

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I chose 'Enhancing the Rural Option: An International Perspective' by Dr Jonathan Sher of the OECD and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill because the themes and tensions he refers to are still present today. He refers to rural schools and rural communities being tenacious, diverse and possible. He explains how surviving is not enough but that we must also strive to improve rural schools. We have to remember that the meaning of the term 'rural' varies enormously from country to country. Sher describes the role that technology and blended learning can play in rural education. He extols the virtues of routing education in the local setting, in experiential learning and fostering community involvement, all themes we can recognise around us today. Sher has a rallying cry: that the survival of rural schools is not enough; they must also have active and appropriate support.

Rachel Shanks

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Enhancing the Rural Option: An International Perspective

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Three words which best describe today's rural schools and rural communities are: *tenacity*, *diversity* and *possibility*.

Their tenacity is evidenced by their survival—and occasional expansion—in the face of decades of relentless urbanization. Indeed, the extent of “rurality” in the industrialized nations is nothing short of startling. Despite predictions to the contrary, rural populations are *not* going away.

Although there has been a decline in the rural proportion of national populations in Europe and other developed regions of the world, there has not been a similar reduction in the absolute number of rural residents. At present, there are approximately 220 million people living in the rural areas of the OECD Member nations. This is equivalent to the aggregate population of the world's twenty-five largest urban areas. Put another way, the OECD *rural* population is comparable to the *total* population of France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom combined. Further, rural to urban migration patterns are slowing considerably in most countries and have stopped, or even *reversed*, in other OECD nations. Obviously, such a large population can no longer be regarded as marginal or insignificant.

Just as the tribulations of metropolitan life have rekindled a growing awareness and appreciation of rural communities, so too, the disenchantment with the realities of large-scale urban schools has caused policymakers to recall the existence and virtues of rural schools. As smallness increasingly is viewed as a big asset, the tenacity of rural schools—in the face of government drives to consolidate them—is now often applauded rather than deplored. Here, too, the sheer number of small rural schools which are currently in operation is surprisingly high.

For example, France still maintains more than 11,000 rural one-teacher schools, 95% of which had an enrolment of fewer than twenty-five pupils. More than 1,300 of these schools had eight or fewer students and several thousand had fewer than fifteen pupils enrolled. In Finland, 70% of *all* primary school students are enrolled in schools with three or fewer teachers. Portugal also relies upon small rural schools so extensively that 51% of *all* Portuguese children attend schools with only one classroom and more than 30% are served by schools having no more than two classrooms. Even in New Zealand, approximately one-third of the nation's primary schools are one- or two-teacher institutions.

Scotland, too, exhibits a similar distribution of schools. In 1978, 36% of *all* Scottish primary schools had fewer than one hundred students; 25% had fewer than fifty students; 12%

had fewer than twenty-five pupils and 57 schools (2% of the nation's total) had fewer than ten students. Needless to say, the percentage of small schools in the predominantly rural regions of Scotland was higher still. For example, primary schools having twenty-five or fewer pupils accounted for 48% of all primary schools in Orkney; 34% in Shetland; 31% in the Borders region; 29% in the Highlands region; and 25% in the Western Isles.

Beyond their tenacity, today's rural schools and rural communities are characterized by their *diversity*. Think, for example, of families living in the Western Australia outback a hundred miles from their closest “neighbours” and perhaps twice that distance from the nearest town. Then, think of families living on the outskirts of a small village in rural England, within perhaps ten miles of half a dozen similar villages and certainly no more than a day's journey from London. Both are considered rural in their own national contexts, yet their differences would seem to outweigh their similarities.

The images conjured up by the word *rural* vary enormously from country to country (and often within countries as well). From reindeer-herding communities in Lapland to Appalachian coal mining communities in the United States; from remote farming villages in the Mediterranean countries where donkeys are still the most common form of transportation to chic ski resort areas in Switzerland frequented by the “jet set”; and from fishing settlements on the coast of Iceland to the chateau country in France, the range of conditions and communities which fall into the “rural” category is truly staggering.

Rural communities characterized by considerable wealth are by no means unknown, although rural regions tend to be among the poorest in each country (and some resemble their Third World counterparts more than the usual image of “advanced” countries). Some rural areas are the fastest-growing areas in their countries while other are experiencing steep declines. In some OECD countries, rural adult illiteracy is virtually nonexistent, while in others it is more commonplace than a secondary-level education.

Rural schools, despite considerable standardization, continue to reflect the diversity of the local communities they serve. Small schools are the norm in most rural areas, but large comprehensive secondary schools are increasingly common. At the same time, there are remote rural areas in several countries where home instruction (via correspondence) is the rule rather than an exception. Some rural schools have only the most meagre financial and human resources upon which

to draw, while others are amply endowed. Rural schools are often the most strictly conservative institutions and vigorously (if not exclusively) impart the "basics". Yet, rural schools can also rightly claim to have created most of the currently fashionable urban "innovations" like peer instruction, cross-age grouping, mainstreaming mildly handicapped children, individualized instruction and using the community as a learning resource.

The simple fact is that rural communities, rural schools and rural conditions are so diverse that one can find evidence to support nearly any characterization. This reality renders monolithic rural policies at the national level ineffective and unrealistic. More and more national policymakers are finally coming to understand that flexible, locally-relevant rural policies and programmes constitute the best strategy for solving the problems and tapping the full potential of their nation's rural schools and communities.

Once policymakers accepted that rural life was here to stay; that past governmental initiatives had not adequately responded to the diversity of rural circumstances; and that rural schools and communities could be an attractive alternative to their urban counterparts, the foundation had been laid for a new emphasis on improving the quality of rural policies and rural institutions.

One manifestation of this renewed interest in rural rejuvenation can be found in the work of OECD's Centre for Educational Research and Innovation. Beginning in 1976, the CERI Governing Board (with one member from each of the OECD Member nations) has actively supported projects in the field of rural education. Although modest in financial and staff terms, these international efforts have yielded a wealth of new data and have given substance to the emerging sense of *possibility* about rural school improvement.

The first venture in this area was the CERI Project on Basic Education and Teacher Support in Sparsely-Populated Areas. This initiative (commonly referred to as the SPA project) attracted the active participation of eleven countries—including the United Kingdom (represented by both England and Scotland).

Work on the project was carried out in three broad categories: Secretariat (i.e. CERI staff) missions and research, country papers containing relevant background information on SPA education, and special reports on particularly interesting rural educational innovations within the participating nations.

Scottish involvement in the SPA project was notably active and productive. In addition to a major country paper, two special reports—one by HMCI Mr. R. S. Johnston on rural teacher support strategies in Scotland and one by Mr. John Murray and Mr. Finlay MacLeod on locally-relevant bilingual education in the Western Isles—were written and published. The Scottish inspectorate of Schools was the coordinating agency for the SPA work, but several local authorities and experts were directly involved as well.

The findings of the SPA project have been published in a new book entitled *Rural Education in Urbanized Nations: Issues and Innovations*. * Drawing upon the extensive information

provided by national governments and academic experts, this document discusses a wide range of rural issues including: school size, transportation, attendance, rural school quality, the economics of rural education, school closures and the alternatives to closure, rural curricula, teacher characteristics and concerns, and teacher support strategies.

Twenty-seven conclusions generated by the SPA project are presented along with the supporting documentation. These range from very general conclusions such as "reforms which intentionally or unwittingly serve to 'urbanize' rural education are likely to have negative effects" to rather specific ones like "new initiatives, such as explicitly recruiting rural-oriented candidates at the preservice training stage, have significant potential for ensuring a continuing supply of qualified rural teachers".

Still, the heart of this book, and the SPA project as a whole, can be found in the collection of ten special reports on specific rural education innovations in the OECD countries. The major topics addressed through these chapters are: delivery systems, in-school innovations, support mechanisms and community-school linkages. It is these reports which confirm the wisdom of maintaining a strong sense of *possibility* about the prospects of rural education, for they serve as a powerful reminder of the fact that successful rural school innovations *can* be created and "institutionalized". A few examples should suffice in reinforcing this point.

A report by Mr. L. C. Taylor entitled "Schooling with Television in Rural Areas: Portugal's Telescola" details the experiences of the Telescola over the past thirteen years of operation. Basically, Telescola is the only well-established example in the OECD countries of an integrated learning system in which television plays a central instructional role, covering the full curriculum at the "first-cycle secondary" level (grades 5 and 6) and serving tens of thousands of rural children. Although recent political developments in Portugal have altered the original Telescola strategy, it remains a remarkable example of the use of advanced technologies to deliver basic educational services to remote rural populations.

Three features of this innovation are particularly noteworthy:

1. its ability to transcend television's conventional role as an occasional supplement to "normal" school operations and to use television successfully as a primary medium of instruction;
2. its ability to integrate effectively the technological and human elements of the rural "reception posts" (i.e. schools) so that they become mutually supportive; and
3. its ability not only to provide rural students (in their own communities) with educational opportunities far beyond those previously available, but also to deliver these services at a cost far below that of traditionally organized educational programmes in the towns and cities.

Another delivery system/support mechanism special report by Mr. Max Angus, Mr. Michael Williams, Mrs. R. Hillen and Mr. Glen Diggins is entitled "Putting the Outback into the Forefront: Educational Innovations in Western Australia". Two interesting rural innovations—the Isolated Students Matriculation Scheme and the Chidley Education Centre—are described in detail.

The Isolated Students Matriculation Scheme (ISMS) was initiated in 1974 in response to the fact that correspondence

*This volume, published in 1981 by Westview Press, is being distributed in the U.K. by Bowker Publishing Company in Epping, England.

education in Western Australia did not include the final two years of secondary-level schooling (years 11 and 12). As a result, rural children either had to leave their families and be boarded in an urban area or discontinue their formal education entirely. The ISMS was designed to be a real educational alternative available to rural youth desirous of both continuing their education and remaining in their home area.

Although the scheme essentially provides instruction by correspondence, it has certain distinctive features. First, it includes a comprehensive curriculum development unit, which has prepared the print and audiovisual materials used by students. Secondly, the scheme employs twelve senior teachers as tutors, who are in personal contact on a regular basis with students. Thirdly, teacher contact with students is reinforced through study camps, which are held twice annually, and through home visits by regional tutors three times each year.

Although it is still too early to judge all the effects of the ISMS, it has already earned a continuing place in the educational system of Western Australia. Its current efforts to both expand the available curricular offerings and explore the possibilities of utilizing microfiche and/or satellite communications to reach isolated students in a more effective manner bode well for the future of this effort.

The second half of this chapter focuses on the Chidley Education Centre. The Centre was created in 1976 to respond to the need for sophisticated assistance to rural children (and often their teachers and parents as well) who either have severe learning disabilities or other serious handicaps. The equipment, facilities, and specialized staff offer rural students with such problems a level of support and assistance quite beyond anything previously available to them. The Centre's programme although individualized, contains five basic steps: assessment and diagnosis, programme development, implementation of learning strategies, transition to the local environment, and follow-up. Three features of the Chidley Centre are particularly noteworthy:

1. It is not intended to replace "normal" schooling in the home or community environment but rather to find out exactly how a particular child's problem can best be dealt with where he or she lives. Thus, children stay at the Centre for relatively short periods of time (usually three to six months) rather than permanently.
2. Extensive support is given to rural parents and to teachers in order to help them successfully follow up the work begun by the Centre staff.
3. The Centre's services are available at little or no cost to the parents.

On the in-school innovation/school-community linkage side, there are several fascinating reports, such as one by Mrs. Gail Parks entitled "Foxfire: Experiential Education in Rural America". In this chapter, the fourteen-year history of one of the most successful and progressive U.S. rural innovations is analysed.

The Foxfire project grew out of a secondary school language arts class in a remote Georgia school in the Appalachian region of the United States. The teacher who created it began with the idea of helping students learn about themselves, their community, and their cultural heritage by going out and collecting oral histories of the area and its traditions from parents, relatives, neighbors, and other local residents.

These histories (covering a wide range of subjects such as traditional arts and crafts, folk medicine, local history, and folk tales) were then transcribed, edited, and published as the *The Foxfire Book*. The volume became a rather phenomenal commercial success, and over the following years several similar, equally successful books (again researched, written, and produced by rural students) were published. Other activities include a student-written quarterly journal (*Foxfire Magazine*), which currently has several thousand subscribers nationally, and a student-run record company which is recording local folk music and tales. The Foxfire notion of experiential education to enhance student learning and foster community involvement and pride has inspired the creation of approximately 150 similar projects across the United States.

Much was learned during the course of the CERI SPA project, but much still remains to be learned. One of the most encouraging results was a discernible increase in the interest and willingness of national governments to continue the search. This was accompanied by the commitment in a variety of OECD nations—certainly including Scotland—to seek new directions for educational policy and practice in sparsely populated areas.

All governments have made errors of omission and commission in the past concerning rural education. Without a doubt, demanding "more of the same" is not the answer to the pressing questions posed by rural education today. However, to the extent that policymakers and practitioners are willing and able to embrace the new directions pointed out through the SPA project, the future of rural schools can be a bright one.

The importance of *improving* rural schools rather than simply preserving them cannot be stressed too strongly. The possibility of educational excellence is a very real one in most rural schools, but it will not be realized by accident or through the maintenance of a static system of provision. This point is well underlined in Mr. R. S. Johnston's SPA chapter entitled "Beyond Mere Survival: Teacher Support in Scotland's Rural Schools". As Mr. Johnstone notes in this report:

The danger is that far too often the debate about school closures has been reduced to the question of mere survival. There is a great temptation among both parents and administrators to behave as if the decision to keep a given small school open marks the end of the necessary action and discussion about its future. This temptation must be strenuously resisted. Small schools, particularly in remote areas, which merely survive, but remain cut off from necessary resources and assistance, can hardly be viewed as dynamic institutions or as schools which are living up to their not inconsiderable potential. The condition for success in these instances is very clear—survival must be accompanied by active and appropriate support.

At the completion of the SPA project in 1979, there was a general sentiment among member governments that further rural education work could be productively carried out at an international level. However, the argument was that additional work on rural schooling *per se* was not as vital as an exploration of the connections between education and development in the context of local rural communities. Whereas the SPA project had looked *inside* of rural schools, it was suggested that any

new initiative should look *outward* from the education system in order to understand better what education could and should do to assist in the revitalization of the rural communities being served.

This concern among policymakers sprang from two sources. The first was the understanding that a wide range of local communities, and their residents, had been "left behind" in the implementation of national and regional development strategies. In other words, there was a growing interest in the fate of those local communities and local population groups who had not shared adequately (or been excluded altogether) from the benefits of national and regional economic growth.

The second concern was that neither the role of education in the decline of these local communities nor education's potential role in their revitalization were clearly understood. Governmental interest in local level development had been manifested primarily through direct economic interventions (e.g. encouraging private sector relocation with public subsidies and tax incentives, or sponsoring such capital-intensive development projects as road building or industrial site construction).

Direct attempts or explicit public sector policies designed to promote local development through educational means were all but non-existent. Yet, policymakers and development specialists were becoming increasingly aware of the fact that the success of *economic* development initiatives in ameliorating local conditions was dependent upon critical *human/social* factors—that is, factors to which education was inextricably bound. Thus, ignoring the current effects and potential contributions of education to local development (and vice-versa) was a luxury which could no longer be afforded.

Thus, in 1979, the CERl Governing Board created a new project on Education and Local Development to extend and supplement the rural work undertaken by the SPA project. Since its inception, the eighteen nation ELD project has been concerned with:

1. helping Member countries analyse the ways in which education affects, and is affected by, local economic development strategies;
2. considering education in its broadest sense and any intentional learning experience, in order to discover those areas of education—formal or non-formal, early childhood through adult—in which a significant relationship to local development can be found or nurtured;
3. emphasizing the rural dimensions of ELD issues in OECD nations, but incorporating a sufficient level of urban research to help clarify which aspects are specific to a particular context and which are generalizable;
4. locating and documenting innovative programmes, policies and strategies directed toward improving the relationships between education and local development;
5. sharing the knowledge generated through this project among all the interested OECD Member countries.

Work on the ELD project has been carried out through Secretariat research; a Country Survey of national and local ELD programmes and policies; a series of field-based international seminars on ELD topics in Finland, Alaska (USA), Italy, Spain and France; and, once again, an extensive series of case studies and special reports on rural ELD innovations. Two examples of these case studies may prove useful in imparting a sense of the ELD project's directions.

From the formal education side, there is a case study on the Öckerö project in Sweden. Öckerö is a small island off the west coast of Sweden with a lower secondary school, Brattebergskölan, serving students from neighbouring islands as well as from Öckerö itself. By the late 1970s, local parents, students, teachers and administrators had come to believe that the "normal" classroom-based school experience was not adequately addressing the needs of either students or the local community. Consequently, the school day was divided into two parts: half the day would be spent on traditional academic pursuits and the other half would be used for a wide variety of experiential education activities. Many of these activities are tied to community needs and local development opportunities. For example, students now operate a community radio station serving these small islands. Students also operate a fish farming business, as well as a commercial greenhouse of their own construction from which they raise and market tomatoes. Because Swedish law precludes schools from directly operating enterprises, the Brattebergskölan community cooperatively established a non-profit organization to manage these ventures. Financed from local contributions, philanthropic grants and the profits of student operated businesses, this community organization is creating new opportunities for students to "learn by doing" (such as buying an old boat which students are repairing and refurbishing for commercial use) and serving as a focal point for local development initiatives.

From the adult, non-formal education side, there is a special report on the "escuela campesina" (peasant school) movement in Spain. Started in the village of La Carrera in the late 1970's by two local priests (although independent of any official Church control), there are now eighteen village-based peasant schools in the province of Avila alone. "Classes" are held in homes, churches or other available buildings and coordinated by volunteer community members having relevant skills. The "curriculum" is drawn almost entirely from the actual experiences, problems and concerns of the local peasants. The objective is to help peasants to understand better both their condition and the pragmatic steps they can take themselves in order to improve their position. Thus, the educational work of the *escuela campesina* has three components: (a) discussions and activities aimed at "consciousness raising", i.e. strengthening self-images, clarifying both obstacles to development and targets of opportunity, forging a collective identity, and motivating collective action; (b) technical lessons and practical skill development around such topics as livestock management, agricultural marketing strategies, and dairy product analysis; and (c) concrete actions to promote local development (often done in conjunction with the local peasant union) such as establishing cooperatives for buying and selling agricultural products or protesting unfair practices by agricultural middlemen.

The conclusions and recommendations emerging from the CERl ELD project are currently being prepared for publication along with the case studies. It is anticipated that the final project book will be available in mid-1982.

The ELD project itself culminated with a final international conference held in the Western Isles during June, 1981. The choice of location for this conference, which brought together leading policymakers, practitioners and academic experts from eighteen nations, was by no means haphazard. In part, the Western Isles venue was selected because of the opportunity

it afforded participants to visit and examine the fascinating range of valuable ELD-related innovations launched there since the creation of the Western Isles Council in 1975. Another reason Scotland was chosen was in recognition and appreciation of the excellent contributions made to CERI's rural activities by the Scottish Education Department. In fact, it can be said with little fear of contradiction that Scotland's role in the SPA and ELD exercises was a uniquely positive and active one. The leadership and support exerted by the Scottish authorities was invaluable in bringing these international efforts to successful fruition.

One hopes that the serious commitment to the improvement of rural education and rural community life evidenced by such organizations as the Western Isles Islands Council, the Scottish Inspectorate of Schools, the Highlands and Islands Development Board, the Institute for the Study of Sparsely

Populated areas at Aberdeen University, the Scottish Council of Social Services, the Arkleton Trust, and Aberdeen College of Education will only grow stronger and more productive with the passage of time. By continuing to enhance the rural option, Scotland will not only help both its rural and urban citizens, but also will serve as a beacon helping other countries to see new directions toward a brighter future for their rural children.

Note:

For further information on the Scottish-OECD connection in rural education, see, for example: R. S. Johnston et al., *Off the Beaten Track*, an Occasional Paper of the Scottish Education Department (Edinburgh, HM Stationery Office, 1981); Duncan Kirkpatrick and R. S. Johnston, *Education and Local Development in Rural Areas: A Scottish Country Paper* (Paris: Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, OECD, 1981); and J. Morris, *Small Is Beautiful in Education Too* (Langholm, Scotland: The Arkleton Trust, 1980).

