



4-1-1981

Viewpoint: The future of rural schools

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Recommended Citation

Jinks, Jerry L. (1981) "Viewpoint: The future of rural schools," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 8: No. 3. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1900>

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Viewpoint

The future of rural schools

We have in this issue a provocative set of contributions which both poses new directions as well as delineates problems to which rural educators must respond, either immediately or at least eventually. The issue has a decidedly western flavor since most of the authors are either now, or have until recently, been working and living in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains. Perhaps readers will forgive us if an occasional hint of regionalism manifests itself. If challenged on this point I suspect most of us would only smile and say we deserve the latitude, (in our best Gary Cooper tradition, of course).

If my colleagues' contributions can be taken to task at all it might be because they have, in the midst of their recommendations for the future, probably been too supportive of the present educational establishment. The underlying assumption has repeatedly been one of suggesting rather cautious directions which indeed can be fully accommodated by the existing order. Perhaps such conventional wisdom will be the key to the future. However, I believe that compelling arguments can be made for a much more sweeping philosophical restructuring, especially in teacher education.

Our present view of teacher education is one steeped in a kind of engineering mentality, a view which considers the teacher as craftsman rather than professional, even though we lay claim, rhetorically, to professionalism. The result is that the engineering philosophy reduces education to its most primitive character whereas a professional philosophy seeks to prepare the teacher to effectively deal with diversity and, as indicated several times in this issue, response to diversity is the name of the game.

Until we recognize the need for rethinking teacher education we will continue to see rather unimaginative and somewhat simple-minded schemes to improve rural schooling.

The issue is one of awakening teacher education to its responsibilities. The major step, I believe, is to recognize the unique opportunities teachers have to serve as architects of the future, and consequently, the responsibility of teacher education to prepare and assist teachers in that work. This of course will require teacher education to abandon, or at least to relegate to relatively minor status, our current penchant for such weighty issues as the design of competency based programs to effect a more orderly lunch line. Instead we must commit to the concept of the educated, literate person as teacher rather than to the shallow, trained performer of management skills.

The future alternatives for education in general, and teacher education in particular, are in fact quite clear. The education system, like any other system, must obey the age-old imperative to either evolve in response to changing conditions or become extinct.

By the way, I'm sure the reader is aware of the fact that elementary students know much more about dinosaurs than about their own physiology, or culture, or history and . . . but that's a topic for another time.

Jerry L. Jinks
Guest Editor