DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 375 997 RC 019 831

AUTHOR Johnson, Michael N.
TITLE School Leaders and the Renewal of Rural Community: Dare the Schools Save an Old Social Order?
PUB DATE 12 Aug 94
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (Indian Wells, CA, August 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Community Development; *Democratic Values; Educational Change; *Educational Philosophy; Elementary Secondary Education; Entrepreneurship; Governance; Rural Areas; Rural Development; *Rural Education; *School Community Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Community Viability; *Multinational Corporations; *Rural Renewal

ABSTRACT

Rural school and community renewal efforts may depend upon a reconceptualization of our democratic institutions and practices. During at least the last 130 years, we have come to judge our democratic institutions on the basis of whether they deliver the goods rather than develop our people. In the name of progress, efficiency, higher standards of living, and equal opportunity, our leaders have been willing to do nearly anything, and we have been willing to overlook nearly anything, so long as the goods have been delivered. Modern commercial practices exploit people and places in the pursuit of maximized profits. Having plundered the countryside and moved virtually the entire citizenry into the urban economy, multinational corporations are now beyond the control of any government and are moving toward the exploitation of the whole world. An alternative view of a good society is based on a conception of democracy in which human development rather than efficiency is the ultimate standard for evaluating systems of governance. As a foundation for rural renewal, this view acknowledges the interdependence of persons grounded in their particular place on earth. The purpose of education, then, is to learn to live in a place well, and educational practices for rural renewal focus on the local context, students' entrepreneurial skills, and community development. Examples of rural schools implementing these changes include Nebraska's Schools at the Center Initiative, Alabama's Program for Rural Services and Research, South Dakota Black Hills Special Services Cooperative, and South Dakota State University's Rural School and Community Renewal Program. (SV)

School Leaders and the Renewal of Rural Community: Dare the Schools Save an Old Social Order

Michael N. Johnson
South Dakota State University

A paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
National Council of Professors of Educational Administration
Indian Wells, CA
August 12, 1994

Running head: RURAL RENEWAL

Abstract

Rural communities and their schools are in serious decline due in large measure to the collapse of small to medium-sized family farms. However, there is more at stake in this decline than simply the disappearance of a quaint way of life. What concentrated wealth and power has done to the countryside is also being done, more subtly, in urban and suburban centers too. Foundational to rural school and community renewal efforts is a reconceptualization of our democratic institutions and practices. The resulting developmental conception of democracy can then serve as the standard by which to judge current ruinous institutions and practices and renew town and country life.

We can have democracy in this country or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can't have both

Louis Brandeis,

Supreme Court Judge

In 1932 George S. Counts, a Columbia University professor issued his dramatic challenge to educators to lead the effort to renew our society's commitments to democracy and egalitarianism. His speech entitled, "Dare the schools build a new social order?" was not only a response to the immediate problems of the 1930's economic depression, but was also a call for educators to address the larger social issues revolving around the technological and social transformations taking place in American society.

In the 1980s the diminution of people, promise, and community in rural places was every bit as devastating for those involved as that of the 1930s. Osha Gray Davidson in his moving documentation of the farm crisis of the 1980s, *Broken heartland: The rise of the American rural ghetto*, has dispelled any lingering myths of a bucolic life in our countryside (Davidson, 1990). But the root causes and consequences of the disintegration of rural communities in America are also present throughout our society. Since our democratic tradition has from its start professed the values and beliefs necessary to develop and sustain the communal social arrangements we now need, I title today's call, "Dare the schools save an old social order?"

In this paper I sketch the reasoning behind proposed shifts

in rural educational practices that may not only contribute to the solution of the rural crisis, but also that larger crisis which many believe, as indicated in the Brandeis quote above, has gripped our entire society. The paper has three main sections: the problem in the countryside, democratic alternatives for renewal, and action plans from rural educators.

I want to acknowledge the following rural researchers and and educators upon whose work mine is based: Osha Gray Davidson, Paul Nachtigal, Paul Theobald, Wendell Berry, Dale Snauwaert, Wes Jackson, David Orr, Alan DeYoung and Craig Howley. All of them, and scores of others whose names don't immediately spring to my mind, deserve credit for their scholarship and research which has provided the foundation for these thoughts. Many of the aforementioned will receive specific credit throughout the remainder of the paper.

The Problem in the Countryside

A sinkhole has long been developing in our countryside and much of it crumbled dramatically in the 1980s. The bedrock of rural communities is the small to medium-size family farm. Upon these farms the countryside's towns and cities are firmly fixed, along with their schools, businesses, local institutions, culture, heritage, and people. This farm population has eroded from 30 million in the 1940s down to less than 5 million today. This steady eating away of the base of rural communities became a dramatic collapse with the farm crisis of the 1980s. Thousands of rural communities across the country were seriously diminished as their small businesses, banks, schools, hospitals, churches, young families, and finally whole communities disappeared into the

sinkhole and exist no more.

Davidson describes many of the surviving rural areas as rural ghettos. He explains that:

> The word "ghetto" speaks of the rising poverty rates, the chronic unemployment, and the recent spread of low wage, dead-end jobs. It speaks of the relentless deterioration of health care systems, schools, roads, buildings, and the emergence of homelessness, hunger, and poverty. It speaks too of the outmigration of the best and the brightest youths. Above all, the word "ghetto" speaks of the bitter stew of resentment, anger and despair that simmers silently in those left behind. The hard and ugly truth is not only that we have failed to solve the problems of our urban ghettos, but that we have replicated them in miniature a thousand times across the American countryside (Davidson, 1990, p.158).

And we must make no mistake about this: as our countryside collapses the people leave and their problems are taken to our already over-burdened cities. The web of life is inextricably interconnected throughout our country. Destruction in one part reverberates throughout. This degradation of rural places and their peoples ought to serve as a bellwether for us all, rural, urban, and suburban alike.

Why have so many family farms disappeared, dragging their rural communities down with them? The glib answer is, "That's progress." The inefficient small farmers just don't make it. The remaining large-scale operations provide us (urban dwellers) with

a steady, cheap supply of food and fiber, even to the point of having surpluses left over for export. So what's the beef?

The beefs pointed out by the critics of industrial agriculture are numerous and, in addition to responsibility for the demise of the family farm, include: the tremendous hidden economic costs involved in governmental supports of agribusiness, the problems attendant to the concentrated wealth and political power of agribusiness giants suggested by Brandeis, the corruption of governmental officials and policies, the large-scale ecological damage resulting from industrial agriculture, the narrowing of the land-grant university's research and service agenda, the exploitation of rural peoples, and ultimately, some believe, the destruction of the very bases of a democratic and egalitarian society.

This may seem like a lot of weight to bear by an enterprise many of us have come to view as a marginalized part of our modern society. To begin to comprehend the corrosive nature of what is going on in the countryside we need to examine more carefully the historical roots of our rural decline.

The ideological struggle between competing views of democracy has been present in our country from its inception (see for example the debates about the issue between Jefferson and folks like Hamilton and Madison). Increasingly this debate was decided in favor of an elitist viewpoint. As a result, for at least the last 130 years, governmental policy, business practices, and the people's common sense have come to be dominated by a meritocratic view of the good society at the expense of more participatory and developmental viewpoints. Consequently, we have

come to judge our democratic institutions on the basis of whether they deliver the goods to, rather than develop, our people. This view of democracy is well summarized by Christopher Lasch when he cites the progressive liberal thinker Walter Lipmann's idea of democracy as written in the New Republic in the 1920s:

> Under the altered conditions of industrial life, the popular participation in government would only lead anarchy and mob rule. Instead of "hanging human dignity" on self government, Lippman argued, democrats would do better to hang it on universal access to the good things in life. *The test of government was not whether it produced self-reliant citizens but whether it produced essential goods and services* (Lasch, 1991, p.366, italics added).

Accordingly, in the name of progress, efficiency, higher standards of living, and equal opportunity, our leaders have been willing to do nearly anything, and we have been willing to overlook nearly anything, so long as the goods have been delivered.

And indeed our nation has become richer while the people's quality of life steadily declines. Corporate profits skyrocket while labor's real wages shrink. Wealth and power increasingly concentrate and corruption correspondingly grows. While pockets of great affluence are celebrated, poverty, hopelessness, and despair become ways of life for ever growing numbers of our people, rural and urban. For the last twenty-five years even the middle class has begun to feel under siege.

Simply put, the effects of the modern commercial practices of exploiting people and places in the pursuit of maximized

profits has come home to the American people big time. We are seeing it first and most starkly in the countryside, the centers of the worst of these 'colonial" extractive practices (Berry, 1993). Here industrial agribusiness practices and corporate giants mine the resources of the countryside as cheaply as possible, wantonly stripping forests, mines, water, food, and fiber from rural places and shamelessly exploiting rural people and places for the sake of the bottom line. Buying cartels and government policies collude to keep raw materials' prices down and heavily mechanized production maximized. The more the earth and the people in local places suffer the greater the profits. The earth be damned. The people be damned. Profits be maximized. After all, the business of America is business.

The list of injuries suffered by rural people under the regime of industrialized agriculture is long. In addition to the monopolistic manipulation of small farmers out of existence, the raw stuffs cheaply purchased from the remaining producers by the corporate giants are then exported out of the area to be processed and have value added elsewhere only to be sold back to the rural people at exorbitant prices for exorbitant profits. The most devastating blow to rural people occurs after they have taxed themselves dearly to educate their young well and the "colonial" masters then siphon off the brightest and the best to import as workers into their distant corporate centers. This rural brain drain effectively insures the continued colonial status of rural peoples and places in our commercially dominated culture.

Wendell Berry states very pointedly what is at stake for all of us with the current great push of concentrated wealth and

power in the form of the multinational corporations:

> The work of these industries...is now almost complete. They have dispossessed, disinherited, and moved into the urban economy virtually the entire citizenry; they have defaced and plundered the countryside. And now this great corporate enterprise, thoroughly uprooted and internationalized, is moving toward the exploitation of the whole world under the shibboleths of "globalization," "free trade," and "new world order." The recent revisions in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade are intended solely to further this exploitation. *The aim is simply and unabashedly to bring every scrap of productive land and every worker on the planet under corporate control* (Berry, 1993, p.101, italics added).

Further driving home this point of the power of these multinational corporations Paul Theobald noted in a recent address to the Montana Conference on Rural School Consolidation the words of Yale historian Paul Kennedy, "The multinational corporations have become so powerful there isn't a government in the world that can stop them" (Theobald, 1994). And House Agricultural Committee Member James Weaver put it this way:

> These companies are giants. They control not only the buying and selling of grain but the shipment of it, the storage of it and everything else. Its obscene. I have railed against them again and again. I think food is the most - hell, whoever controls the food supply has really got the people by the scrotum. And yet we allow six corporations to do it in secret. Its

mind boggling (In Davidson, 1990, p.35).

Lest you think this is all too vague, the names of the six agribusiness multinationals which control our country's and much of the world's food supply are: Cargill, Con Agra, Pillsbury, Ralston-Purina, Continental Grain, and Tennecco.

And it gets even grimmer. Davidson's book includes a two page footnote partially listing Cargill's diversified products, literally ranging from aluminum through zinc! It comes as no surprise that this monopolistic power has corrupting influences in our governmental institutions. The revolving door between the executive suites of these corporate giants and our high governmental offices is well documented. For example, Clayton Yeutter moved from Con Agra's board of directors to serve as Reagan's United States Special Trade Envoy in 1985. Clifford Hardin resigned from Nixon's administration (in a scandal alleging campaign funds for milk price supports) to become vice-president of Ralstin-Purina. Who replaced Hardin? Earl Butz, a then recent director of Ralstin-Purina (Davidson, 1990). And so it goes under the elite conception of democracy.

Before going on to the next section on democratic alternatives to this construction of social institutions based upon an elite conception of democracy, we need to note that our own universities are also participants in these revolving door practices among the servants of corporate power (Baritz, 1960). The agricultural research agendas of our land grant universities are in the main supported by, and in support of, the policies and practices favored by corporate agribusiness. Our personnel and graduates move freely between university post, governmental

appointments, and slots in agribusiness corporations. And finally, who among us does not hold annuities and other retirement funds heavily invested in these corporate giants? We too profit from this terribly destructive system and are in large measure responsible for perpetuating it through our research and educational programs largely supportive of the ideology underpinning the corporate liberal state (Weinstein, 1968).

Democratic Alternatives

Perhaps the most eloquent contemporary spokesperson for alternative ways of rural life and the restoration of balance to our people and places is Wendell Berry. In a prolific outpouring of books, essays, and poems, Berry has simply, straightforwardly, and uncompromisingly pointed out our society's foolishnesses, recounted how we have gotten into this fix, and how we might go about getting out of it. His message is basic and uncluttered. Nature, not maximized profit, must be our standard for living in a place well. The human scale needs to be maintained in all our endeavors. Centralized authority has no competence in the knowledge of particular places and peoples. People and places are not expendable. Rootedness in particular places and loyalty to particular people is part of that human scale and the source of individual character and communal well-being. The further individuals and societies move from these basic truths the more destructive they become of nature, households, neighborhoods, communities, and finally themselves. As a culture we have seemed bent on destruction for the last 400 years and been doing a thorough job of it of late (Berry, 1990).

The bases of the solution for Berry and each of the

thinkers we will consider in this alternatives section are decentralization and a renewed attention to the particularities of local places and people. Berry explains why the countryside needs to be our initial focus for this renewal:

> My feeling is that if improvement is to begin anywhere, it will have to begin out in the countryside. This is not because of any intrinsic value that can be ascribed to rural people, but because of their circumstances. Rural people are living, and have lived,for a long time, at the site of the trouble. They see all around them, every day, the marks and scars of an exploitative national economy. They have reason, by now, to know how little real help is to be expected from somewhere else. They still have, moreover, the remnants of local memory and local community. And in rural communities there are still farms and small businesses that can be changed according to the will and desire of individual people (Berry, 1990, p.168).

What can be done, according to Berry, is to reintroduce small-scale industries and local markets in the countryside. As he says:

> We need...a system of decentralized small-scale industries to transform the products of our fields, and woodlands, and streams: small creameries, cheese factories, canneries, grain mills, saw mills, furniture factories, and the like. By 'small' I mean simply a size that would not be destructive of the appearance, the health, and the quiet of the countryside (Berry,

1990, p.113).

It is important to note that the alternatives being sketched in this section are consistent with our democratic heritage, albeit with that conception of democracy which has been a minority viewpoint for the last couple hundred years. In his important new book, *Democracy, education, and governance,* Dale Snauwaert places such alternatives squarely within our tradition. In his view the two competing conceptions of democracy in our tradition are the "elite" conception and what he calls the "developmental" conception. The former justifies a representative cast to democratic institutions, the latter calls for participatory modes of governance. As pointed out earlier, the elite conception has been in ascendancy since the founding of our republic and secured cultural hegemony during the progressive era. Since that time elites have had a near complete control of the "formulation and exercise of governmental prerogatives and popular participation is restricted to the periodic election of elites" (Snauwaert, 1993, p.4).

Snauwaert fleshs out the meaning of the alternative "developmental" conception of democracy by noting that:

> From the perspective of this tradition (Rousseau, J. S.. Mill, Marx, Dewey, Gandhi) *human development rather than efficiency is the ultimate standard upon which systems of governance should be chosen and evaluated.* Development, in this tradition, is conceived broadly as the all around growth of the individual, which may include the development of moral, intellectual, spiritual, and creative capacities. The

> above theorists maintain that the realization of this value is contingent upon active participation in the decision-making processes of institutions (Snauwaert, 1993, p.5, italics added).

The purpose for schools governed in accordance with the developmental conception of democracy is the full development of particular individuals, not the mass production of the human capital needed for our competition in the new world order's global economy.

The final foundational scholar to consider in this democratic alternatives section is educational historian Paul Theobald. He describes his work as, "an attempt to retrieve the community oriented emphasis of some of the original architects of of liberalism, a kind of 'agrarian" emphasis that was buried by the power of commercial and industrial interests" (Theobald, 1993, p.117). Through a series of articles and books Theobald has presented a vivid social and intellectual history requisite for an understanding of the ethos of rural people, their communities, and schools. By teasing out the views of self and community fostered in rural places in earlier agrarian times, he enables us to see how these notions of the interdependence of self, place, and others have been displaced to a large degree by the individualistically-oriented conceptions so prevalent today (Theobald, forthcoming).

The essence underlying these alternative conceptions of the good democratic society is highlighted well when Theobald notes that:

> Wendell Berry's educational philosophy is a critique

> and a positive orientation grounded in the fact that we share the earth and are responsible for it, *The fundamental educational truth here is that how we treat the earth and its inhabitants will in the end determine our own character* (Theobald, 1993, p.42, italics added).

Thus the foundational pieces of a coherent alternative view of a good society appear to be in place: the acknowledgement of the intradependence of persons with each other as grounded in their particular place on this earth, the purpose of education being to learn to live in a place well, and the standard for all democratic institutions being whether they further or hinder these first two aims.

Rural Schools For Rural Renewal

Where then do we stand in our efforts to realize our goal of the simultaneous renewal of rural communities and their schools? To begin to answer this question it is useful to check current efforts against the ideas contained in Theobald's suggestion that:

> If we were to render rural education a better fit with its social milieu, it would revolve around curriculum and pedagogy designed to maximize the deliberative power of rural children. The community and particularly its relationship to the larger forces in society would be the central focus of study. Rural schools would emphasize the ability to construct a persuasive argument. Collaboratively, rural students would learn at an early age how to frame and execute

purposes designed to enhance the common-unity. (Theobald, forthcoming).

Paul Nachtigal, the dean of rural educators, recently delivered a paper in Australia at the International Conference on Issues Affecting Rural Communities in which he undertook just such a task of describing current efforts underway to restructure rural schools and their communities in accordance with the ideas expressed in the above alternatives section. As Nachtigal pointed out these renewal practices all revolve around 1) reconsiderations of the purposes of schooling, 2) shifting curriculum focus to the local context, 3) developing students' entrepreneurial skills and, 4) supporting community development (Nachtigal, 1994).

The following examples of how rural schools have begun implementing these changes are drawn from a variety of sources.

Nebraska's Schools at the Center Initiative- This initiative, led by Paul Olson and Jim Walters from the University of Nebraska, provides the support for a community-based educational and rural development effort. In conjunction with the Center for Rural Affairs directed by Marty Strange and located in Walthill, Nebraska, the Schools at the Center Initiative has assisted classroom teachers in shifting their curricular focus to literatures that are "useful to rural students' pursuit of meaning for their experience" (Center for Rural Affairs, 1992). Similarly, all the other areas of the curriculum are being focused upon local and regional heritages and experiences to help the students develop an understanding of themselves and their community. In addition Nebraska rural schools are becoming sources of economic and cultural strength for their communities through projects such

as using art classes to develop ads for local businesses, using the schools' computer resources to inventory the communities' assets and needs, marketing student produced greeting cards, and establishing and running community youth centers. Many other school and community relinking projects have been inspired by these earlier efforts and are themselves now getting underway.

Alabama's Program for Rural Services and Research- This program is directed by Jack Shelton and Robin Lambert of the University of Alabama. They have organized PACERS, a small schools cooperative of 28 public schools in 25 rural Alabama communities. Funded by the Lyndhurst Foundation, this program has assisted the small schools to share resources and undertake innovative new programs. These programs "provide students opportunities to gain and use academic skills through the study and documentation of their own communities, provides information useful for their appropriate development, and supports the long term viability of rural communities and students" (PACERS, 1994, p.2). The programs have involved students in working with FmHa to build and rehabilitate houses, in helping meet the hunger and nutritional deficiencies needs in rural areas, and in creation of jobs for students to build a strong local economic base. These collaborative efforts have involved thousands of students and residents in improving their schools and communities simultaneously. Other PACERS programs include a student-based computer company (Tiger computer), a school run printing shop, and an aquaculture business venture.

South Dakota Black Hills Special Services Cooperative- This cooperative venture in western South Dakota is working to produce

rural community-based education under the leadership of Terry Albers, field director for the state's 1.3 million dollar School Modernization Project (Schools at the Center: Community-Based Education and Rural Development, 1992). Among the work inspired by this group was the high school students' project in Custer, South Dakota in which they documented the impact of their discretionary spending on the local economy. Eventually their work caught the attention of the local Chamber of Commerce which was so impressed that they decided to hold their meetings at the high school during the school day so the students could attend Chamber meetings. The students,in cooperation with the Chamber, also applied for a FmHa sponsored low cost senior citizen housing grant.

Students in Belle Fourche, South Dakota published a major demographic study of their community and worked so effectively with the local community newspaper that it was decided to discontinue the school newspaper and employ the students as stringers for the local community paper instead. A student in Belle Fourche also began her own successful Old World Breads business utilizing, at cost, the school's kitchen facilities. (Nachtigal, 1994).

South Dakota State University's Rural School and Community Renewal Program- Paul Theobald coordinates this new program in eastern South Dakota funded in part by a Kellogg Foundation grant. The first of six envisioned cluster groups of cooperative schools was formed last spring. The nine rural school districts in this cluster have begun a conversation and cooperative ventures aimed at mutual self help efforts to restore vitality to their communities and schools. Central to their mission is to develop

reasons for their young people to stay in their home communities after graduation.

There are a good number of other rural school and community initiatives underway which I would, time permitting , also note here. For example, the Foxfire program in the southern Appalachian region, the REAL program in Georgia, and the work of the Rural Institute at McRel come to mind. There is no denying that efforts are underway in the countryside.

Conclusions

No doubt efforts of the sort noted above will not alone end the influences of the multinationals on rural places, nor end the ruinous practices of industrial agriculture. The legal efforts of governmental trust busters will be required to accomplish the first goal and increased public pressure for change is required for the second. However, what the above noted efforts can accomplish is to put an end to the destructive messages we send our rural youth. As Theobald has said, "Increasingly, in rural areas, our schools have become the vehicle for an increasingly powerful cultural message; success means getting the hell out of here: If you want a ticket out do well in school" (Theobald, 1994, p.8). Rural school leaders must do all in their power to insure their schools and communities never again send such a demeaning message to their young. Efforts such as those noted in this paper go a good distance toward overcoming these destructive messages and thus toward renewing our rural places and people,

References

Baritz, L. (1960). *The servants of power*. Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press.

Berry, W. (1990). *What are people for?* Berkeley: North Point Press.

Berry, W. (1993). Decolonizing rural America. *Audubon*, March-April, 100-105.

Counts, G. (1978). *Dare the school build a new social order?* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Davidson, O. G. (1990). *Broken heartland: The rise of America's rural ghetto*. New York: Doubleday.

Lasch, C. (1991). *The true and only heaven: Progress and its critics*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Nachtigal, P. (1994). Rural schools, rural communities: An alternative view of the future. A paper presented at the International Conference on Issues Affecting Rural Communities. Townsville, Queensland, Australia. July, 1994.

Program for Rural Services and Research. (1994). PACERS: Small schools cooperative newsletter. Vol.1, No. 2. May, 1994.

School at the center: Community-based education and rural redevelopment. (1992). Walthill, Nebraska: Center for Rural Affairs.

Snauwaert, D. T. (1993). *Democracy, education, and governance: A developmental conception*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Theobald, P. & Snauwaert, D. T. (1993). The educational philosophy of Wendell Berry. *Holistic Education Review*, 6(3), 37-43.

Theobald, P. (1994). The significance of history to the rural

educational enterprise. In Weste, J. A. (Ed.), *An anthology of rural educational thought and practice*. Oak Park, IL: NCREL Publication.

Theobald, P. (1994). Forces supporting consolidation and some alternatives. Address delivered at the Montana Conference on Rural School Consolidation. June, 1994.

Theobald, P. *A place for rural schools: A communitarian perspective*. Westview: forthcoming.