Towards a realistic approach to rural education

Socio-economic disparities in Latin America present a challenge to any educational plan designed for the rural environment.

Until now a general rural education strategy has been applied, to the detriment of depressed areas. In those areas, the benefit derived from educational facilities tends to be proportional to spending power. Accordingly, instead of being conducive to equal opportunity, the educational system serves only to widen the gap between the privileged few and the under-privileged majority.

The population of these depressed areas totals approximately 65 millions. If we show the geographical areas with an acceptable living standard on a map of Latin America, they form small islands in a sea of extreme poverty. Despite this situation, there is an educational system which is totally unrelated to the realities of life.

The main aim of this article is to examine the problems encountered in subsistence-farming areas. The most urgent task in these areas is to provide for the basic necessities of life: food and a minimum of protection against the rigours of the environment. The educational system has to respond to the situation in these areas; it has to define the knowledge and skills which will enable the population to overcome their harsh living conditions.

Subsistence economies are characterized by close links between work and family life (everybody sows, everybody harvests, everybody tends the animals); by a lack of capital for investment in modern technology; by a huge labour surplus which results in young persons and adults temporarily leaving home to seek work elsewhere (harvesting or casual work); and by considerable emigration to urban areas, particularly among young people. Those who stay in the rural areas have either to live with their parents, generally in an underemployment situation, or to work as wage-labourers for the agricultural enterprises, with little prospect of permanent employment or promotion.

Importance of a general basic education

If we accept the social character of education, we must also accept the need to gear educational planning for the rural environment to the needs of all age groups and their various problems. Thus, any determination of basic educational requirements has to go beyond the framework of the school institution and concentrate on structure and means.

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In other words, the concept of basic education should encompass the education of children and adults, and schooling has to be closely related to out-of-school life and the world of work.

In fact, it does not seem possible to achieve any significant improvements in the so-called school-age sector without adopting a strategy conducive to a general advance in the field of education. In this context, the Unesco Standing Group for Experimental Literacy Projects has stated that the term ‘functional literacy’ refers to the mechanisms of reading, writing and counting and other basic knowledge which will enable people to run their lives more efficiently and improve productive capacity and occupational skills. This approach involves a continuous, integrated, permanent process which should not be identified with any specific period of a person’s life, even though it may assume a more intense form during the so-called school age.

Basic education as a function and responsibility of the community

A strategy designed to make the rural community assume responsibility for basic education should include promotional efforts with the following basic tasks: to help people to see education as a social act; to determine the various types of educator and the various forms of educational action; to establish training requirements in different subjects, for different individuals and groups; to achieve a situation in which each individual feels himself to be, and actually is, an educator and a student; to help to remove the paternalistic element from education and services; and to recognize local resources, the cultural strength of the community.

The school would then be seen as a supportive institution within the educational process and the teacher as a community worker involved in certain aspects of this process. The education of children would not be confined to the school. The school is the community, the home, the family plot, the place of recreation.

The plan to entrust responsibility for basic education to the community is the most important innovation in rural development. When the adult population understands its implications, they will realize that they are included in a process of permanent education. The educational process will emerge, functionally, from the people’s discovery of their own educational needs and their attempts to provide for those needs.

For years there has been disagreement in Latin America about rural education policy. Some maintain that there is a single form of education with a single set of general objectives. Others stress the need for structures, curricula and methodologies specially designed for the rural environment.

The enormous importance of the rural sector and agricultural production in developing countries would tend to substantiate the views of those who advocate a form of education geared to the needs of the rural community, since the solution of the serious problems of the agricultural sector in the immediate future will require the ruralization of the overall educational system.

In regard to rural education in particular, the problem has to be seen in terms of the need to localize education by closely relating it to the environment in question (in a form of environmentalization); here the term ‘environment’ refers to the interactional complex comprising ecological and biological factors. In view of the universality of its conception, this approach, which certain documents have termed ‘ecological methodology’, should be accepted as suitable for application to the overall educational system.

In a context where the division of labour is negligible, the danger of technical and agricultural education becoming an end in itself is far greater than in occupational situations where