

WHY TEACH AGRICULTURE IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

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This question is honestly asked by many thoughtful people who regard education from the traditional point of view as a kind of mental training quite distinct from the exigencies of existence.

Education is all this to be sure, but it is much more than this. The mental training represents the results, the fruitage of education, not its methods, its material, or its processes.

Constructively education implies two parties, the *teacher* who represents the older generation and the *pupil* who is getting ready to live. If the older generation is to help the younger it must have suitable *material* to work upon, and as nobody

knows the future the material must be drawn from what lies at hand and from the knowledge and experience of the present and the past.

The first reason for including agriculture among the materials employed for the training of the next generation is that it is *useful*—the very reason which some would advance for its exclusion.

Historically, utility has always been the basis of education. The non-utilitarian is a later, a very valuable, but a far less fundamental consideration than is the useful.

The primitive teacher is the father and the medicine man. Whatever the medicine man may teach of stoicism, of superstition, of religion, it is the father who teaches how to trail, to kill, how to elude an enemy, how to build a fire in the rain, how to run and dive,—in short, how to live as living is defined among savages. And the chances of the pupils living are in direct proportion to his faithfulness and ability as a learner. Considered in the large, education is not different now.

If we omit the wandering philosopher, the first schools were employed to teach definite occupation—the practice of medicine, the knowledge of law, the teaching and advancing of religion. Latterly, we have recognized a longer list of necessary occupations in which learning may be useful, and among these is farming, which for our purpose may be defined as the using of the land for the scientific support of human life upon the earth.

It is manifest that the amount of human life which can be supported upon the earth and the happiness it may attain are in large measure determined by the skill and the scientific knowledge with which we use the soil. No apology is due therefore for advancing the *argument of utility* as the *fundamental reason* for teaching agriculture in our public schools.

A second reason for including agricultural courses in our curriculum is that thereby we *connect the schools with real life*.

This connection is hard to make and many a graduate has turned out useless only because the school failed to connect its activities with the serious business of living and the student

failed to make the connection for himself. For many years his board and bills have been paid automatically and without exertion on his own part; indeed, he has come to consider going to school as a kind of occupation,—why not after sixteen years of carefree experience? Such an unhappy result of universal education may and does occur in technical courses, but far more rarely than in the non-technical.

Again, the materials and the applications of an agricultural course are concrete and close at hand. They lie within the student's personal purview and well within his capacity to understand.

Much of the material of education is of necessity abstract or else far away either in time or space. The concrete is clear and easy of apprehension. It is enticing, for it presents opportunities. It is exhilarating for the connection and the meanings are evident and world-wide.

Still again, agriculture provides something for the student to do. It enjoins performances. It threatens failure but it invites success. And all this is well worth while.

Much of the material and motive of education lie entirely beyond the ability of the student to exert the slightest influence upon the course of events.

He sorely needs opportunity for trying out his powers of construction as well as those of expression, and among all the subjects that offer this opportunity, agriculture is one of the best because it is concrete and because it lies close at hand. It is a man's job. It is tremendously full of opportunities and consequences. It provides good material on which the boy may whet his faculties. The prospect is eminently educational.

Incidentally, the field, the materials, and the philosophy of farming afford an almost infinite variety of engaging opportunity for meditation and for expression, and healthy intelligent expression is vitally connected with intellectual growth.

Agriculture in practice *is an art as well as a science.* As a subject of instruction it is a science. The content is eminently useful, leading to the proper conduct of the great business of production. Its study demonstrates that successful civilization

must rest upon a successful management of the lands of the earth, because food provides the only source of energy for the support of human life.

The methods of the study and the teaching of agriculture are the methods of science, and one great reason for teaching science is to develop in the pupil the faculties of exact observation, precious conception, logical analysis, and correct conclusions.

To these ends the physical sciences are especially valuable; none more so than agriculture. For precise methods no science equals mathematics, although chemistry is a good second; but when observation, analysis, induction, and deduction are all involved, no subject equals in teaching power the physical sciences, and of all physical sciences agriculture is the most concrete, the most human in its applications, and the most fundamental in its results upon the welfare of man.

In general, science must not be relegated to the fringes and fads of our education, but it must constitute the background,—indeed the very warp and woof of a system of universal education. This is because science is only another name for facts that are definitely ascertainable, and of all the body of knowledge or supposed knowledge, facts of this kind studied in their relations and in their human meanings are eminently educative.

This is not decrying those forms of knowledge or of philosophy that cannot be definitely set down. They, too, are useful, but they have no presumptive rights. True, the soul of man needs food that is not tangible, just as truly as the body needs nourishment, but even here much of the material involved is purely secondary. For example, while literature is inspirational, language is mainly a tool for its expression and understanding.

The correct teaching of agriculture, too, soon leads the student into the field of obligation, of achievement, of usefulness, of contact with God's creatures, of partnership in His Plan, and of a wholesome philosophy of life in living. No consistent student of agriculture can be either an atheist or a loafer. He cannot sleep well nights unless he does his duty day by day and works with the Lord in the feeding of His people.

When once the higher view and possibilities of agriculture are more generally understood and taught, then will universal education begin to be able to fully justify its existence and the time and the money spent upon it.