

## Recovering a Tradition of Rural Progressivism in American Public Education

David Leo-Nyquist  
*Saint Michael's College*

*Dewey-inspired educational progressivism in the first half of the 20th century generally has been assumed to have been an urban phenomenon. This article traces a tradition of rural progressivism during the period 1910-1950 centered at Teachers College in New York City, and explores the implication of that tradition for educators today.*

The greatest single need for the improvement of country life at the present time . . . is for a corps of properly prepared country teachers who will enter our existing country schools and, through vitalized teaching and tactful social leadership, convert them into living centers for the instruction of both children and adults and the complete upbuilding of country community life.

—Mabel Carney, 1912 (p. 252)

Have we not reached the time when we are justified in expecting that every rural school, however small, shall be a place of genuine education of high quality?

—Fannie Dunn, 1931 (p. 423)

The following question was asked during a dinner conversation at a rural education conference a number of years ago: "Is there a tradition of rural school progressivism?" At the time, I was reading Lawrence Cremin's *The Transformation of the School* (1961), which remains the best and most complete history of Deweyan progressivism. In it, I had come across several sections that dealt with rural education issues, with references to a handful of good rural schools that seemed to fit within the context of Dewey-inspired educational experiments. But a few examples of what would appear, from Cremin's account, to be isolated and unconnected progressive rural schools in the period between 1900 and 1940 hardly constitute what I would call a "tradition" of rural school progressivism. So my unexplored response to the question at that time was a tentative "No." Nevertheless, I remained intrigued by the notion.

It stuck with me during the summer of 1998, when I attended a summer gathering of the Annenberg Rural Chal-

lenge. The Rural Challenge—now the Rural School and Community Trust—brought together into a loose network a collection of exemplary rural schools deemed to be both "genuinely good" and "genuinely rural" by a group of scouts who scoured the country in search of innovative practices. I was fascinated by the similarities between the prominent features of Cremin's progressive rural schools and the characteristics of the schools that were selected to be part of the Rural Challenge network. We appear to be in the midst of a renaissance of interest in rural America in general and, more specifically, in rural schools and rural teaching. This focus on rural school reform has been well documented,<sup>1</sup> but I have been unable to see in this literature a possible connection between what's happening now and earlier examples of good rural schools. At the 1998 Annenberg gathering, it occurred to me that perhaps we were experiencing the beginnings of yet another turn-of-the-century "Country Life" movement, with rural teachers once again playing a critical role. As illustration, consider this published statement by the Rural Challenge about their target schools:

*What are "Genuinely Good Schools Serving and Served by Rural Communities?"*

*Characteristics of rural schools include community interactions, smallness, and a relative lack of bureaucracy. Genuinely good schools serving and served by rural communities demonstrate three principal qualities:*

1. *They are in reciprocal relationships with their communities, recognizing their interdependence and their larger educational purposes;*

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to David Leo-Nyquist, Box 247, Saint Michael's College, Winooski Park, Colchester, VT 05439. (dleo-nyquist@smcvt.edu)

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<sup>1</sup>See DeYoung (1991); Dunne (1977, 1983); Haas (1991); Howley (1991, 1997); Nachtigal (1982); Sher (1977, 1981, 1983, 1995); Silver & DeYoung (1986); Theobald (1991, 1995, 1997); and Theobald & Nachtigal (1995).

2. *They are developing a pedagogy of place; and*
3. *They are accepting responsibility to be bi-cultural institutions, allowing students to succeed in different environments, both rural and urban.* (Annenberg, 1997, p. 3)

Still, I wanted to explore the larger historical tradition that this current network of rural schools might be part of. More recently, I have revisited that question and pursued the answer in a systematic fashion, and my revised response now is "Yes: there *is* a tradition of rural school progressivism." This paper is my attempt to recover that tradition in hopes that it has something significant to contribute to the current situation in rural schools. The tradition in question is primarily one of best teaching and teacher-support practices that were recorded in order to be handed down from one generation of teachers to the next. For reasons that I will suggest below, this tradition disappeared from sight in the 1950s, and it has not been accessible as a resource for rural teachers and teacher educators for the past 50 years.

Following the lead of Arthur Zilversmit (1993), I see significant agreement among writers in the 1920s and 1930s as to what constitutes a progressive school. Zilversmit maintains—and I agree—that a progressive school during that period (a) followed a child-centered rather than a subject-centered curriculum; (b) addressed the "whole child"; and (c) allowed students to participate in the determination of the content of their education.<sup>2</sup> To this, I add the following characteristics of a progressive school, which are closely aligned with the Rural Challenge selection criteria: treating teachers as curriculum-makers; using the community as a resource and the school as a community center; knowing students and their community well, taking their needs seriously, and addressing those needs within the curriculum by creating a "curriculum of place"; perceiving smallness of scale as an educational advantage instead of as a liability; relating to local ecosystems as a science lab and to community and school social systems as the most appropriate training ground for democratic citizenship. Most of these ideas not only have a long and distinguished history within the "progressive" traditions, but they also have historical continuity within the experience of small rural schools.

I have examined a body of primary source material written by rural educators from the period under study (roughly, 1910-1950), carefully cross-referencing bibliographical material until a number of recurring names emerged. These are strong rural voices—self-conscious of their work as constituting a distinctive rural tradition of integrated educational theory and classroom practice. Unfortunately, there has been only limited recognition of this earlier tradition of rural school progressivism within the

more recent, reform-minded rural education literature that laid the groundwork for the Annenberg Rural Challenge network. Being linked to a century-old tradition of innovative and highly successful teaching practices in small rural schools by no means lessens the significance of current reform efforts. Indeed, this connectedness may serve to bolster the credibility of these efforts. Reconnecting with our progressive past can also open up new possibilities for our collective future. Before exploring that tradition, I wish to build a case for how a collection of descriptions of good teaching practices from an earlier era might make a contribution to good teaching practice in the 21st century.

#### The Importance of a "History of Practice" for Teaching

Unlike fields such as architecture (which preserves its creations in both plans and edifices), law (which builds a case literature of opinions and interpretations), medicine (with its records and case studies), and even unlike chess, bridge, or ballet (with their traditions of preserving both memorable games and choreographed performances through inventive forms of notation and recording), teaching is conducted without an audience of peers. It is devoid of a history of practice. (Shulman, 1987, pp. 11-12)

Many other teacher-writers from our century and other centuries have ensured that you need not learn it all by yourself. Contrary to what is sometimes said about it, teaching has a recorded history that can be consulted by those who wish to learn from it. They must, however, be prepared to ferret it out of the stories. (McDonald, 1992, p. 122)

So which is it? Is there a written tradition of good teaching practice in rural schools, or isn't there? Who's got it right: Shulman or McDonald? Vito Perrone (1989), an historian of educational progressivism, reminds us of the role that descriptions of good practice can play in transmitting successful teaching practices from one generation of teachers to the next. He uses the example of John Dewey's Laboratory School at the University of Chicago that, in his opinion, "may have been early progressivism, in practice, at its best" (p. 93). The first detailed written account of Lab School teaching practices was published in 1936 by two sisters who had taught there. "In this account," says

<sup>2</sup>This definition of educational progressivism admittedly is narrower than earlier efforts by Cremin (1961; see preface and pp. 88-89) and Tyack (1974, pp. 196-198), as it focuses on the pedagogical and child-centered strands of progressivism linked historically to Dewey's early work at the University of Chicago Lab School.

Perrone, “readers are told about the thinking, the actual curriculum efforts, children’s and teachers’ actions, and the careful reflection about practice that permeated the setting” (p. 97). That is, readers of this text have access to school practices “from the inside,” from a teacher’s perspective, so that the accumulated experiences at the Lab School can be critically examined and learned from, and can provide the possibility for improving current teaching practices based upon what has been learned. To Perrone, this inability of the best progressive teachers and schools to share their work with a wider audience in a timely fashion weakened the movement as a whole and slowed its growth: “Had [this book] been a more integral part of the early progressive literature, the movement might have been more solid and developed more successfully” (Perrone, 1989, p. 97).

When progressive teaching practices were under attack in the 1950s, the lack of an established written tradition of shared practices contributed to the triumph of more conservative pedagogical and curricular orientations within American public schools. Thus in the 1960s and 1970s, when there was a resurgence of interest in progressive education as a vehicle for school improvement (e.g., the “open education” movement and the proliferation of Teachers’ Centers), much teacher time and effort was invested in re-inventing the proverbial wheel rather than reconnecting with the earlier tradition. According to Perrone (1989, p. 97), “not enough had been learned soon enough from the earlier progressive period to make the most of this historical opportunity . . . [This was] the result of insufficient description of good earlier practice being accessible for examination.” Perrone argues that teachers can be assisted in improving their teaching by reaffirming good practices from earlier generations of teachers:

One means for such a reaffirmation is to give renewed attention to careful descriptions of teaching and learning written by teachers in classrooms that value children’s interests and intentions, where the educational encounter is viewed expansively rather than narrowly. . . . Building a literature of teaching written by those in the midst of settings where teaching continues to have potency would be a wonderful counterpoint to the descriptions of teachers as managers, passing out and collecting worksheets geared to skill deficiencies identified by scores on a host of standardized and criterion-referenced tests. We need good descriptions.

As a historian, I view these descriptions as more than grist for challenge to contemporary formulations of education; I view them also as an important base for the long-term progressive struggle for better schools, as part of an ongoing effort to assure that what is learned is retained, as capable

of informing the next generation of progressives who might be even more successful because of our efforts now. (pp. 98-99)

Joseph McDonald (1992), arguably one of the finest contemporary authors on education, writes persuasively about the importance, for teachers, of “reading for a profession.” By reading accounts written by other teachers of their own teaching—“heroic stories” as he calls them—teachers can be more thoughtful about their own work:

When I was a young teacher, I needed visions of relations I could emulate, if not quite match. Later, I needed a push to free myself from convenient treaties in the relations of my teaching. Still later, I needed reassurance that my continuing struggle with these relations had real and positive effects on kids and through them on the world. These are all conditions that by and large cannot be soothed by the scientific discourse of educational research, nor by the bromides that constitute much of the other professional discourse in teaching—by journal-talk and conference-talk and in-service-workshop talk. I think they are conditions that instead demand heroic stories. . . . By “heroic stories,” I do not mean Mr. Chips stories. I mean bold and angular stories, instead: rich work histories honestly told by the workers themselves. I mean stories layered thickly enough to lend depth of field to readers’ otherwise thin perceptions, stories that offer the critical grip their readers need to read their own teaching. (McDonald, 1992, p. 101)

One of the teachers that McDonald “reads” in his book, Eliot Wigginton of Foxfire fame (see McDonald, 1992, chap. 6), has described his own effort to “read for a profession”:

Out of a desire both to check my observations against those of others and to locate the best existing books available for teachers, I began to read.

One paragraph into *Experience and Education* by John Dewey and things began to crystallize. By the time I finished it, I was shaking my head in amazement. On every one of its less than a hundred pages, insights had leaped out into the air and I had found myself pounding the arm of my chair and saying, “That’s *right*, damn it, that’s *exactly* right. That’s just the way it is.” All those discoveries I thought I had made about education, Dewey had elucidated into complete clarity fifty years and more before. . . . And he showed me how incomplete my own philosophy still was. I

read more, and the same thing happened over and over, to my chagrin and awe.

There are some who say it is good that we never learn from the past. . . . When I'm in certain moods, I can be persuaded by that argument. Having to reinvent the wheel—making old discoveries independently through our own observation—has a nice, confirming sound.

But most of the time I don't buy it. Not anymore. . . . Not after having seen teachers in the infant stages of projects ignoring completely the experimentation that has already been done and fully documented about similar attempts around the country from which they could learn so much. . . . I could have been saved a lot of trouble. And what of all those classmates who began with me as first-year teachers and dropped out of the field almost immediately, realizing how little they actually knew about teaching and believing themselves to be completely alone? (Wigginton, 1985, pp. 280-282)

There is great irony here: The person most responsible in this generation for creating a "curriculum of place" for rural schools was cut off from the rich historical antecedents of his work because he was unaware of their existence.

During my own public school teaching career, I shared this desire to "read" my own teaching by learning how to "read for a profession." Among other sources of support and inspiration, I found that Wigginton and McDonald spoke directly to my situation as a rural teacher working in an isolated setting. I was searching for other rural teachers who had written insightfully about the unique circumstances of teaching in rural places. Eventually, but too late to have an impact on my own teaching in a rural setting, I discovered the tradition of rural teaching practice described in this paper. Echoing Wigginton, "I could have been saved a lot of trouble" if someone had connected me early in my career with a rich tradition of recorded teaching practices that resonated with my own needs and my own rural context. My hope is that other rural teachers can overcome their feelings of isolation by learning that many others have "been there before," and have left written accounts of good practice that are both inspirational and useful.

#### The Context: Teachers College and the Country Life Movement

The tradition of rural progressivism in American public education had an unlikely home base. Centered at Teachers College in New York City, a distinctive school of thought related to rural teaching emerged over a period of

30-plus years. It gradually achieved clarification and maturity in the hands of a few major theorists and writers who had ongoing ties to rural classrooms. This body of ideas and detailed descriptions of "best teaching practices" in small rural schools were then disseminated nationwide through book-length works and many shorter articles published in popular educational journals, such as *Educational Method*, *Teachers College Record*, *Progressive Education*, *The National Elementary Principal*, and *The Journal of Rural Education* (which existed from 1921-1926). This informal national network of rural teachers, teacher educators, rural administrators, and support staff remained intact until the end of World War II, when a confluence of circumstances disrupted its continuity.

It was actually not so strange that one of the world's largest cities became the intellectual center of activity for rural teaching innovation. At the time, Teachers College was developing a national reputation for being on the cutting edge in many fields, rural education among them. As Cremin (1961) notes,

[Teachers College's] hospitality to all of the major streams of progressivism in education quickly made it the intellectual crossroads of the movement. Recall that it was Charles R. Richards, one of the first professors ever appointed at Teachers College, who founded the National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education; that it was Mabel Carney who published the earliest best-seller for rural teachers based on the Report of the Country Life Commission; that Dewey and Thorndike were senior professors almost from the beginning; and that Patty Smith Hill's kindergarten was one of the "schools of tomorrow" sketched by the Deweys; and the crucial role of the college in advancing progressive education becomes abundantly clear. (p. 176)

Cremin's reference to Mabel Carney provided a doorway for me into the tradition I am outlining in this article.<sup>3</sup> Carney was a rural teacher and, later, teacher educator who became one of the most active national figures in the Country Life movement at the turn of the last century. The rapid industrialization of this period, coupled with the mechani-

<sup>3</sup>Although other recent overviews of rural school reforms have mentioned Carney and her connection to the Country Life movement, they overlook her later career at Teachers College. See, for example, Silver and DeYoung (1986, p. 58) and Theobald (1997, pp. 175-176, 179). Most recent accounts follow Tyack's (1974, chaps. 1 and 2) interpretation of the dismal pre-WWI situation within rural schools, and accept Cubberley's (1914) more administrative perspective on what he called "the rural school problem" without looking closely at Carney's (1912) significantly different rural teacher perspective on the same issues.

zation of American agriculture, was having a profound impact on rural America and contributing to the rapid depopulation of the countryside and disruption of rural community life. There was widespread concern that America was losing its rural roots as the foundation of our social fabric and democratic ideals. President Theodore Roosevelt created a Country Life Commission headed by Liberty Hyde Bailey, a well-known Cornell University horticulturist, to play a key role in formulating a national strategy for addressing these disturbing trends. Rural schools and rural teachers functioned within that scenario as critical agents for preserving and revitalizing community life in rural America. Perrone (1989) makes it clear that these developments had an impact upon the progressive tradition in education:

Another important early twentieth-century source of progressive educational thought came through the Country Life movement. . . . This movement grew out of an interest in revitalizing the quality of life in rural communities where population growth had plateaued or begun to decline. (p. 92)

Cremin (1961) explains how this widespread anxiety about uncontrolled changes in the countryside was translated into a national rural crusade:

By 1908 both the rising pressure for rural-school reform and the heightening tempo of rural educational innovation had created an interested public extending far beyond the farmers and teachers directly involved. . . . Concern for the renewal of country life had gained considerable support among socially conscious businessmen and professionals in the eastern cities, thereby taking on the character of a national movement. Sensitive to a fertile field in which Progressivism might work its uplifting influence, Theodore Roosevelt appointed a Commission on Country Life and charged it with gathering information and formulating recommendations for alleviating rural distress. . . . The Commission quickly crystallized national sentiment on the rural-life problem.

Only a drastic overhaul of rural education would suffice. Teaching would have to be "visual, direct, and applicable," related always to the immediate needs of farm, home, and community; and schooling would need to be supplemented by a vast national extension program embracing farm demonstrations, boys' and girls' clubs, reading circles, traveling teachers, farmers' institutes, and publications of every sort and variety. Only such a program could generate the personal ideals and

local leadership that the Commission saw crucial to any genuine, long-term revival of country life. (pp. 82-83)

With a few notable exceptions, most recent references to the Country Life movement in the rural educational reform literature have minimized its significance as a grassroots social movement to regenerate rural America. Instead, these references have stereotyped this movement as part of a coordinated national effort to consolidate and close down small rural schools (e.g., see Sher, 1997, pp. 22-23; Silver & DeYoung, 1986, p. 59). Unfortunately, this interpretation is based on a misunderstanding of the nature and scale of the consolidation effort, which involved friends, not enemies, of rural America.<sup>4</sup>

By the time Carney came to Teachers College in 1914, she had already published a book, in 1912, that gave a rural teacher's perspective on the changes taking place in rural America. As Cremin (1961, p. 84) acknowledged, "[This] book undoubtedly trained a new breed of country-school teacher [and] was widely used as a text for rural teachers." By 1918, Carney was joined at Teachers College by Fannie Dunn, another rural educator with personal roots in country school teaching and normal school innovation. That same year, Teachers College created a Department of Rural Education, and for the next 25 years Teachers College became the Mecca for rural educators who wanted to learn how to adapt progressive teaching practices to the unique circumstances of rural schools.<sup>5</sup> Although Carney was not among the most eloquent writers in this group, for nearly 30 years she provided a safe haven and publication forum for many others—including most of those whose work is excerpted below—who created an impressive literature of "best teaching practices" for rural settings. For that reason, Carney is the most appropriate symbol of that collective achievement.

<sup>4</sup>The exceptions to this interpretation all focus more on the grassroots aspects of the Country Life phenomenon than on the official report of the Commission. In addition to the Cremin (1961) and Perrone (1989) accounts already cited, Theobald (1997) asserts that "the rural school consolidation touted by Country Lifers was geared toward the neighborhood level. . . . While it is fair to say that Country Lifers advocated limited rural school consolidation, they would have been vehemently opposed to the horrendous extensions that now shadow the concept" (pp. 179-180). See also Theobald (1991).

<sup>5</sup>This migration to Teachers College during the 1920s and 1930s included hundreds of African-American educators from around the country, particularly those working in the segregated school systems of the rural South. Mabel Carney also coordinated this network. More research needs to be done on the connection between Teachers College and educational reforms in African-American public schools in the rural South during this period. For a useful starting point, see Carney (1942).

### A Sample of the Literature

While Perrone bemoaned above that early progressive teachers did not always share their practices through written records, this fortunately is not true for the rural educators I am focusing on here. I wanted descriptions of good teaching practice in rural settings that are both detailed and reflective, and I found what I was looking for. Kate Wofford, one of the most prolific of the rural progressives, captured the teacher-centered focus of much of this literature in her 1938 book, *Modern Education in the Small Rural School*:

This book has been written for those who teach or will teach in these small schools, and problems here attacked are those which make teaching in the small school different and difficult. Solutions presented here have emanated in techniques developed from a [progressive] philosophy of education and from experiences in the practical application of these techniques to actual classroom situations. (Wofford, 1938, preface)

Participants in this network were very much aware of a distinctive tradition evolving from the unique circumstances of rural teaching and of the existence of an emerging professional literature. Among urban progressives, it was generally assumed that progressive educational practices were best matched with well-known urban private schools where they had originated and which usually had more than four teachers. Both the rural setting and the small number of teachers in each school made these rural schools unusual. Wofford refers to noteworthy rural experimental schools in Missouri and New Jersey that had shaped her understanding of effective teaching practice in rural settings. She also makes it clear that she views smallness of scale as an educational advantage, not a constraint:

The public in general and the educational profession in particular have assumed that a modern program of education is impossible of achievement in the small rural school of less than four teachers. This assumption has been refuted by successful demonstrations at The North East Missouri State Teachers College, Kirksville (MO) and in the Quaker Grove experiment under the auspices of Teachers College, Columbia University. The latter experiment not only demonstrated that education of the modern type can be achieved in a small school, but that it is highly desirable for the satisfactory development of children. (Wofford, 1938, p. 15)

In this section, I provide some sense of the literature that was generated by this group of rural educators during

the period from 1910 to 1950. I have made no attempt at completeness, but have included representative selections from the most prolific writers within this tradition of rural teaching. After providing brief biographical information about each writer and her connection to the larger network, I include an excerpt from a book or article that captures the flavor of the longer work. Most of these voices from the past speak with a power and relevance that are as timely now as when they were written.

While Fannie Dunn (1951) was teaching in the Department of Rural Education at Teachers College during the 1920s, she was also the supervisor for Quaker Grove School, the nearby experimental rural school in New Jersey where Marcia Everett was the teacher. In this excerpt, Dunn develops the theme of a curriculum relevant to rural life and rural culture:

We need a new curriculum pattern. The content certainly will be no less rich than that of city schools; much of it will be identical. But the organization will be functional for rural children. Farm children need gallons and dozens sooner than city school children. City children need making change sooner than country children. Country children have a rich and varied background for firsthand experiences with natural and physical sciences, in animals, birds, insects, rocks, soils, plants, fertilizers, weathering, machinery, electricity—you go on with the list. Certainly science should have an important place early on and throughout the curriculum, if rural children are to improve their present living by understanding and learning to control their environment. Whole days spent mainly inside school walls seems a poor use of rural children's time in harvest season, when the world outside is bursting with opportunities for development through work and play, through participation in social enterprises on many levels, through seeing and enjoying beauty, through applications of science and art. Teacher-guided experiences during this season might serve rural children much as summer camps do city children. (Dunn, 1951, p. 242)

Marcia Everett (1936) spent many years in a county support role as a "helping teacher," a kind of itinerant supervisor/demonstration teacher. She was Fannie Dunne's first graduate student at Teachers College, and in the 1930s she was the helping teacher for Julia Weber Gordon at Stony Grove School. Everett writes about the need for providing support roles for isolated rural teachers and for knowing students and the community well:

Several years ago all the rural teachers in Warren County (NJ) formulated a common philosophy and set up ten objectives to help us live up to that philosophy. . . . As the first step in the practice of our philosophy all of our teachers, young and old, beginners or veterans, are asked to become personally acquainted with their children; to meet the parents of the children; to visit the homes, to know the kinds of institutions provided by the community in which the children and adults assemble, and to know the community itself. . . . To aid the teachers to do this, the Helping Teachers of our county conducted a series of group teachers' meetings that were devoted to the construction of survey guides. These guides help the teachers in their study of the child, the home, of the school itself, of the agencies in the community, of the natural resources, and of the local history and traditions. Once such studies have been made, everything the teacher does in the classroom will be influenced by what she knows, and already a first step in the integration of the child's personality has been taken. (Everett, 1936, pp. 180-181)

Fannie Dunn and Marcia Everett, with private support from a member of the Teachers College Board of Trustees, took over an existing rural school at Quaker Grove (NJ), transformed it into an experimental school, and disseminated a detailed account of their work throughout the 1920s. The first extensive report of the progress of their experiment was published in book form in 1926 as *Four Years in a Country School*. In the following excerpt, the authors make it clear that their focus on instructional improvements within a small-scale setting provided a distinct alternative to the mainstream policy of school consolidation. They also emphasize the notion of teachers as curriculum-makers.

It is probable that there will always be some scattered schools in remote districts which must remain unconsolidated. There are today at least four and a half million children enrolled in at least 165,000 one-teacher schools. For these children, now . . . improvement of instruction in these schools is the only educational hope.

It is this belief which has animated Teachers College in the experimental development of a distinctly rural situation, to the end of organizing ways and means of educating in one-teacher schools.

This bulletin is the first extensive report of the progress of the experiment. Further bulletins are projected to present a suggestive organization of

the elementary course of study, adapted to the instructional conditions and the typical environmental experiences of one-teacher schools. . . .

The curriculum employed in the Quaker Grove School is in general a combination of group and individual activities. Class topics arranged to provide for rotation or alternation of work by years are supplemented by individual assignments or practice exercises of the Dalton "contract" nature. [*The Dalton School was a considerably larger, well-known urban progressive school from this period.*] Where satisfactory commercial material is available for individual practice exercises, it is used, but part of the task of the school has been the creation of suitable practice material where none adapted to its needs is on the market. (Dunn & Everett, 1926, preface and p. 3)

Julia Weber Gordon's (1970) account of her teaching experiences in a one-teacher school is often mentioned in historical overviews of good teaching practices from the 1920s and 1930s (see Dunne, 1977, p. 84; Perrone, 1989, p. 78). What is omitted in those overviews is reference to the larger community of rural teachers and teacher educators that formed her context. Here, she testifies to the importance of reflective writing as a catalyst for good teaching, and to the need for outside support to sustain such reflective habits:

I kept a diary during those years at Stony Grove for, above all, I wanted to learn to be a good teacher, and writing what was happening seemed to be a good way to help me to think more clearly. . . . I am a teacher and not a writer, but in spite of my literary shortcomings I decided to undertake the task of preparing the diary for publication because I felt I had something to say. . . . I want to add this story to the many others which weight the balance in favor of the kind of education that will make a difference in the living of people. It is my firm conviction that education can significantly improve the quality of living. . . . What I have tried to show in this book is a way of living and working with children.

Before I went to Stony Grove I taught for three years in larger schools in our county. During this time I learned to overcome many of the difficulties which are faced by every beginning teacher. But even more important than this, I was inspired by the work of the county and I learned what teaching can mean. . . . In our county we have three Helping Teachers, as rural supervisors in New

Jersey are called, who work closely with the teachers. . . . One member of this group has been in the county for more than 25 years working consistently on the belief that children are important and that what happens to them matters a great deal.

When I began to teach at Stony Grove I was ready to learn and free to experiment to find out how a group of children and their teacher may reach a high level of creative and democratic living. If I have succeeded somewhat, it is because all the roads were open to me. I had every opportunity and invaluable help to discover for myself what mental hygienists have been telling us, that human nature and the situation in which we find ourselves are not fixed but, to an important degree, are what we make them and that they can be changed. (Gordon, 1970, pp. xxiii-xxvi)

The inspiration that Gordon provided to others through her documentation of her teaching practices, which was grounded in the support she received from Marcia Everett and the larger network emanating from Teachers College, was still alive more than 30 years later. John Holt, one of the most influential teacher-writers of the 1970s and 1980s, discovered her account as part of his own effort to “read for a profession.” Deeply involved with the open education movement of the early 1970s, Holt felt connected with the previous generation of teacher-reformers through his interaction with Gordon’s descriptions of her teaching. He describes this connection in his introduction to the 1970 edition of Gordon’s book (during a period of rapid consolidation of small rural schools). In these words, Holt foreshadows the current national attention being given to the advantages of small schools:

We do not need enormous centralized schools in order to have quality education. This is the reverse of what we have been told and sold. All over the country we have destroyed small schools in which it might at least have been possible for teachers to do some of the things Miss Weber did. . . . The idea behind this was that in small schools we could not have, could not afford to have, the kinds of equipment, materials, and specialized teachers that we thought we had to have to get enough variety and depth in the children’s learning. Miss Weber shows us that even in the late ‘30s this need not have been so. In less than a month she and her pupils were already able to make their tiny school in its impoverished rural community a more beautiful and richer learning environment, more full of interesting things to look at and work with and

think about, than most current schoolrooms ever are. (Gordon, 1970, p. xiv)

Prior to these rural school experiments in the East, midwesterner Marie Turner Harvey was inspired by the Country Life movement and by her previous experiences as a rural teacher and normal school instructor to assume responsibility for a one-teacher school on the outskirts of Kirksville (MO). Cremin (1961) describes her accomplishment:

In 1912 the Porter district board invited Marie Turner Harvey to take over the school, with the guarantee of a free hand and three years in which to demonstrate the practicability of a “socialized rural-school curriculum” [which meant using the community as a resource and the school as a community center]. Mrs. Harvey stayed more than a decade, and her innovations were so successful as to inspire Evelyn Dewey to write *New Schools for Old* (1919), a volume that went through four printings the year it was published and quickly made Porter the quintessential example of progressive education in a one-room country school. (Cremin, pp. 291-292)<sup>6</sup>

In her book, Evelyn Dewey describes Harvey’s innovative response to the constraints faced by teachers in pre-WWI rural America:

The majority of rural teachers are prevented by their living conditions from settling permanently in one community or identifying themselves with the local life and interests. Communities look upon their teachers as outsiders, usually find their care a burden, and are apt to take a somewhat patronizing attitude towards them because of their small salaries. Mrs. Harvey believed that the teacher in a community should be as much a part of that community as any other person living in it. Therefore she insisted upon a house of her own. As a mere boarder in the house of some family, her work would not have been possible, nor if she had made the long daily trip to the school from her home in town.

Her classroom problem was to show other teachers how, starting with nothing, and always with

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<sup>6</sup>Evelyn Dewey was John Dewey’s daughter and, along with her father, a tireless advocate for and publicizer of the accomplishments of the emerging network of public and private progressive schools nationwide. See their highly influential earlier book, entitled *Schools of To-Morrow* (1915).

the meagerest equipment, they could use the best methods and give a diversified curriculum. But this was not new to her. The main problem to her and her supporters was to develop a school which should function adequately as a vital part of the community. This was a particularly difficult problem, because it involved creating not only a school, but almost the community itself. Hopeless as this problem looked, it was made easier for Mrs. Harvey because she believed that the methods best for a classroom were also the best for creating a community.

Mrs. Harvey came to Porter not with a ready-made plan for classroom lessons, and a schedule of clubs and social activities for the adults, but with a firm belief that in Porter there lay the possibilities for the development of a real social spirit which, when once awakened, would be powerful enough to build up for itself the methods of expression that were best suited to its needs.

Mrs. Harvey believes that it is the function of the teacher-leader to initiate this cooperation in a community. . . . By showing them how to work as a unit, she has shown them how to convert the promise of country life into a reality. She has never done things *for* the people of Porter, she has done things *with* them. (E. Dewey, pp. 63-64, 68-71)

Kate Wofford (1940) was a long-time collaborator and former graduate student of Fannie Dunn and Mabel Carney at Teachers College, and a teacher educator at the State Teachers College in Buffalo, NY. Here she articulates an understanding of the diversity of rural cultures and of the unique circumstances that a rural "curriculum of place" must take into account. She also anticipates the Rural Challenge focus on schools as "bicultural institutions, allowing students to succeed in different environments, both rural and urban":

There are many types of sub-cultures in America. . . . A special quality of living attends the farmer and to a certain extent the resident of the small town, no matter what his sub-culture happens to be. It is, on the whole, a quality of simplicity which characterizes all those who live and work in undifferentiated environments. It is not an accident that the cultural pattern of the farmer is simple, personalized, and democratic. Certainly it is different from the cultural pattern of the man who was born in a large city and has lived there all his life.

Each child has his own vocabulary, which is largely the product of his environment, and upon which the wise teacher will attempt to build. The vocabulary of the city child will reflect his mechanized environment. He understands electric cars, automobiles, elevators, apartment houses, and perhaps subways. His teacher will begin with the reading experiences which relate to his background. He will soon read, therefore, of trains, streetcars, and automobiles. The vocabulary of the rural child is quite different. He understands farm animals, the importance of the weather, and something of crops. Consequently, his teacher, if wise, will begin his reading experiences within the scope of his own vocabulary. He will read of cows, chickens, and the dog who follows him to school. In the field of science, emphasis for the rural child will begin with nature, while the urban child will approach his study of science through machinery. Later, of course, each child, urban or rural, will explore the other's world, if not by firsthand experiences, then vicariously through books, visual instruction materials, and the radio. . . . It is, indeed, this very tendency to teach children in terms of their environment which explains, in part, the drift away from the use of standardized courses of study toward curriculum guides which allow for freedom in adaptation to regional differences. (Wofford, 1940, pp. 324-325)

Helen Heffernan and Gladys Potter worked for the Division of Elementary Education and Rural Schools in the California State Department of Education. Their article is filled with references to "the philosophy of the modern school." They also refer to several well-known urban progressive schools with a tradition of teachers as curriculum-makers, which they wanted to adapt to a rural context. Heffernan and Potter (1937) emphasize the progressive focus on a child-centered curriculum and on meeting the needs of the "whole child":

Educators can no longer continue the type of curriculum tinkering which has characterized attempts at adaptation to the rural school in the past, but must concentrate upon developing a design which considers the interests and needs of children, the goals of education, the educative resources of the rural community, and at the same time takes into account the instructional problems inherent in the particular type of school.

This proposal for the adaptation of curriculum to rural schools is predicated upon releasing teachers from the necessity of covering any particular

body of subject matter in any particular school year. It necessitates viewing the education of the rural child as a vertical sequence of worthwhile experiences adapted to the level of maturity the child has attained. . . . It proposes much more responsibility for the teacher in studying the capacities and traits of children and in selecting appropriate curriculum experience in terms of these needs. It necessitates the teacher seeing her work as a part of a long-term educational plan conceived to meet the needs of a developing organism. (pp. 52, 59)

The voices of Edmund DeS. Brunner, the most well-known rural sociologist of his generation, and Frank Cyr, a younger colleague of Carney and Dunn who carried a more administrative and organizational version of their work into the 1950s, were also an integral part of the circle of Teachers College faculty who contributed to this tradition during the period under study. The following excerpts are from a special rural education issue of the *Teacher College Record* appear in 1940. Their suggestions for a "wise adaptation" of educational resources originally designed for nonrural contexts and for a small-scale rural community as a possible training ground for democratic citizenship remain sound advice for us today. Their call for a division of responsibility for conceptualizing national and local versions of a rural curriculum provide a framework for thinking about the creation of regional "curricula of place" adapted to local settings:

Some of the problems of rural education are found in rural areas alone. Most of them, however, are those of adapting methods, materials, techniques, and philosophy to the rural situation. The greatest possible utilization of educational methods developed in urban areas is necessary as a practical measure. . . . A major part of the difficulty can be avoided by wise adaptation.

It is necessary, however, to interpret the basic objectives of education in terms of the learner's rural environment if they are to be effectively realized through the educational program. . . . Certain of these needs are common throughout rural America; others are common only to a region, state, or local community. Institutions of nationwide scope are responsible for developing procedures by which a sound interpretation can be made both nationally and locally. In the first case, the responsibility for the interpretation will devolve upon those concerned with rural America as a whole; in the second case, upon those concerned with a locality or an individual community.

Those concerned with problems of school-community relationships and the democratic administration of the schools find the rural community a particularly effective laboratory in which to work. It provides a relatively simple situation in which basic relationships can be examined and fundamental principles discovered. Since the community and its various integral parts may be seen as a whole, it is possible to approach with a clear perspective the problems of utilizing community resources, coordinating community activities, and examining the democratic procedures at work. (Cyr, Dunn, Carney, & DeS. Brunner, 1940, pp. 274-276, 279)

Elsie Ripley Clapp (1952) was formerly an assistant to John Dewey at Teachers College, and the principal and director of the two rural community schools in Kentucky and West Virginia described in her book.<sup>7</sup> John Dewey wrote the introduction shortly before his death, and it represents his last published work on education. Ms. Clapp was also the editor of the journal *Progressive Education* from 1937-1939. The community school she created in Arthurdale (WV) had the active support of Eleanor Roosevelt, John Dewey, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Progressive Education Association president Carson Ryan, and Dean William Russell of Teachers College. This school was widely viewed, in Mrs. Roosevelt's words, as a model New Deal "social experiment in community life which centers around its school" (Perlstein, 1996, p. 629). Clapp's intended audience here is clearly other teachers, who may find in her account lessons to apply to their own contexts:

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<sup>7</sup>Originally published in 1939 by Clapp as *Community Schools in Action*, the story of these two schools was revised and republished, with Dewey's introduction, in 1952 as *The Uses of Resources in Education*. The Arthurdale community school generated controversy at the time because of what some considered to be insufficient attention given to the issues of poverty and race. Specifically, school segregation was legally mandated in West Virginia at the time, and Arthurdale remained a segregated New Deal homestead experiment. Perlstein (1996) has recently criticized Ms. Clapp and her Arthurdale project for their inattention to the unpleasant realities of a region decimated by abandoned coal mines: "Instead of exploring industrial working class life, Clapp promoted a sentimental and sanitized view of local culture" (p. 637). These critiques notwithstanding, *The Use of Resources in Education* continues to demand our attention as an unmatched example of teacher immersion in rural community life as the basis for inspired curriculum making, with some obvious connections to more recent efforts such as Eliot Wigginton's work with Foxfire. In the words of John Dewey (in his introduction to the book), "What it really means to make the educative process a genuine sharing, a truly cooperative transaction in which both teachers and students engage as equals and learners is demonstrated in the cases Miss Clapp describes."

This book is an account of the use and development in education of the resources children and their families use daily as they live: their own abilities and capacities, materials and means found in their environment, their tools and skills, their relations and associations with others, their ambitions and aspirations and the expectations and practices of their social group, their cultural heritage and tradition, and their ways and means of recreation and enjoyment.

It is, in point of fact, a report of the ways in which a group of teachers in two public rural schools—a county school in an agricultural area in Kentucky, and a community's school in a farm-mine region in West Virginia—enabled children, boys and girls, and adults to comprehend and develop these resource-instrumentalities.

This story of our experiences and efforts, mistakes and successes, is set down as it happened and was currently recorded. Its usefulness to other teachers lies, I think, in that it reports work actually carried on in school over a period of seven years with young children, older boys and girls, and with adults.

It may give assurance to teachers who follow this narrative to know that we did not go to Kentucky or establish the school at Arthurdale [in West Virginia] to promote "resource-use education." Our assignment in each place was "to make a good school," and the desire that animated us was to educate children in ways that would serve them as they lived. (Clapp, 1952, pp. 1-2)

Roberta LaBrant Green (1936) taught in a small high school in Holton (KS) during the Depression, and she calls attention to the many practical barriers that make it difficult to sustain a progressive approach within a public school. She emphasizes using the community as a resource and students playing an active role in shaping their learning:

During the last five or ten years, accounts of progressive practices in private and public schools have become increasingly common. For the most part, however, these accounts seem to come from institutions which have special privileges in the matter of equipment, numbers and training of teaching staff, freedom from customary dictation of state departments of education or, in some cases, selection of students. Because of these facts, it may be that an account of the introduction of a progressive program into a small conventional school,

including all the students in the community, where no additional equipment or especially trained teachers have been available, may be of interest. It may to a degree answer the questions so often raised following discussions of progressive practices in experimental or demonstration schools: How can such things be done where there are no extra funds? Where can teachers be found who are able to do such teaching? How can the ordinary school, especially in a small community, find materials? How can such teaching be done in spite of required texts and state courses of study? And last, but certainly important, what will school patrons say of such a departure from tradition and precedent?

The first question to confront the hundred students then was: How can we best begin a study of our homes? . . . Any sound study of the children's environment which would call for a wide variety of composition experiences was held acceptable. Moreover, the benefits to be derived from students' planning and directing their own study seemed of great importance.

The class was asked to report its survey before a club of the leading business and professional men of the town. These fifty men were at first interested in the facts which the young people had uncovered and, from this, they became interested in the kind of school work that enabled the students to make such a survey and report. Even the most casual observer could see the wide variety of legitimate English activities that were involved. Students answered questions and led discussion without hesitation, and assumed complete responsibility for the report.

From the standpoint of curriculum building, the work has justified itself to the community to an extent that could never have been attained by advance explanation. The theory of progressive work would have been hard to explain to great numbers of school patrons, but the concrete example was readily understandable. (Green, 1936, pp. 189, 191, 194-195)

Iman Elsie Schatzmann (1942) studied comparative education at Teachers College in the 1930s, and she traveled extensively throughout Europe and the U.S. to bring an international perspective to the tradition of rural educational progressivism. The introduction to her book was written by Mabel Carney, who was then near retirement. Schatzmann clearly emphasizes the need for the extensive

training and experience necessary for a rural teacher to carry out a progressive agenda:

Far too often rural youth fail to appreciate that life and success may be found in their own communities. . . . While the rural child has a richer background than the urban child for understanding the physical and biological aspects of life, he has fewer opportunities for various social contacts to stimulate his reactions and to develop his personality and his understanding of human relationships. For this reason the rural child is highly dependent on the character of his school and the qualifications of his teacher for the knowledge and experience which are essential if he is to understand and accept his responsibilities and privileges in a democratic society.

Fortunately, the rural teacher is still afforded a maximum of freedom within his school and can therefore apply the principle of independent thought and action to his teaching. The carefully prepared teacher, with plenty of initiative and imagination, will welcome this freedom and use it with great wisdom. On the other hand, this same amount of freedom will become problematical in the hands of the immature and inexperienced teacher. Since rural education calls for such a vast amount of experience, sympathy, and understanding, only those teachers who are best prepared and most highly qualified personally can help rural education and contribute to its progress for the sake of the country child. (Schatzmann, 1942, pp. xii, 206-207)

#### The End of a Tradition

By the time that Fannie Dunn's book, *The Child in the Rural Environment*, appeared in 1951, the outpouring of books and articles related to progressive teaching practices in small rural schools had diminished to a trickle. The following factors contributed to the demise of this tradition:

First, the two central figures in the network—Mabel Carney and Fannie Dunn—retired (in 1942 and 1943, respectively) from their positions at Teachers College and there followed a retrenchment of support at TC for sustaining their work.

Second, yet another wave of rural school consolidation was accompanied by widespread rural school closures beginning in the early postwar years, and this triumph of the "bigger is better" approach shifted attention away from supporting good teaching practice in small schools, which had been the focus of much of the earlier work described here (see Sher, 1977, pp. 37-42).

Third, a nationwide suspicion of progressive practices and ideas in education emerged in the deeply conservative postwar period that served to discredit—at least within most public schools—the brand of educational progressivism that had emanated from Teachers College for 50 years and which included, through guilt by association, much of the work in the Carney/Dunn tradition (Cremin, 1961, chap. 9).

Finally, the normal school traditions of teacher preparation, supervision, and support that were closely linked to the body of work being described here, disappeared.<sup>8</sup> They were replaced by (a) a new system of university-based teacher preparation that tended to discourage the close teacher/teacher educator ties characterizing the normal school tradition and (b) a newly-dominant paradigm for educational research that aped the natural sciences with its quantitative orientation and disparaged the "descriptions of good practice" approach as unscientific (Clifford & Guthrie, 1988, p. 120). Only in the last decade have the emergence of alternative paradigms of educational research and renewed interest in school/university partnerships begun to make the boundaries between teachers and teacher educators, and teachers and educational researchers, more porous. These recent trends open up promising new possibilities for recapturing the collaborative working relationships among rural teachers, teacher educators, and rural researchers described in great detail in the literature under review here.

#### Conclusion

[The best teachers] know these men and women are our allies and our mentors; and they know, through them, that they are not alone in their efforts to make schools work, but that they are merely new entries in a historic and honored thrust through time that they are helping to perpetuate and keep alive—a movement that gives them guidance, that fuels their fires, that gives them the patience that can only come when one sees oneself as being squarely in the mainstream of a long, continuing struggle that must never cease. (Wigginton, 1985, p. 282)

<sup>8</sup>A balanced appraisal of the normal school contribution to the preparation of rural teachers and to rural school reform has yet to be written. For a sympathetic account of the normal school movement as a whole, see Harper (1939, pp. 112-128). An exploration of the creative uses made of the "boundary-spanning" teacher-support roles performed by clinical faculty based in normal schools would be a rich resource for those working today within professional development schools and school/university partnerships, who often appear to believe they are doing something new when, in fact, they once again may be "reinventing the wheel."

Becoming part of a living tradition, as Wigginton suggests here, could provide rural teachers with the boost they need to sustain their passion for “the long haul,” in the words of Miles Horton (1994). If teacher professionalism is to have meaning for rural teachers in the future, it will be in part because their awareness of this tradition makes them more thoughtful about their own practice and more sensitive to their unique teaching contexts. I believe that today’s rural teachers—in particular, participants in contemporary versions of rural school progressivism such as the Annenberg Rural Challenge schools, the Bread Loaf Rural Teacher Network, and the National Council of Teachers of English Assembly of Rural Teachers of English—could benefit from an understanding of this earlier tradition and from thinking of themselves as part of that living tradition. In Wigginton’s words, they can learn to view themselves as “merely new entries in a historic and honored thrust through time that they are helping to perpetuate and keep alive.” Such a link might serve to bolster their efforts to create a network of exemplary rural schools and rural teachers.

Reflecting on the inspiration that he found through the “bridge” provided by Julia Weber Gordon’s (1970) written account of her own teaching practices a generation earlier, John Holt indicates that there’s an important role for such “descriptions of good practice” for each new generation of teachers:

Taken as a whole, [Gordon’s] book should be a rich source of inspiration and imagination for teachers, and indeed everyone concerned with education. We can do these kinds of things, in city as well as country, if we want to. And indeed I know, from letters from teachers and many talks with them, that there are many people in our classrooms right now, and many others who would come in if we let them, who are ready and eager to work in this kind of imaginative, innovative, and above all human way with the children in our schools. (Holt, 1970, p. xxii)

My own experience in talking with rural teachers tells me that much of the necessary foundational work for constructing a viable “curriculum of place” has already been done: that there are, in effect, thousands of small-scale versions of Eliot Wigginton out there who have, in isolation, reinvented the wheel as Wigginton did to make creative use of available local resources in rural settings. The Annenberg Rural Challenge vision—extended into the future—could serve as the catalyst for a rural school reform movement across the country, with rural teachers playing a critical role “through vitalized teaching and tactful social leadership” (in Mabel Carney’s words) that could provide

needed support for a 21st century version of the Country Life movement throughout rural America. Fannie Dunn (1951) expressed this hope quite eloquently a half century ago, and her words still ring true today:

Perhaps the greatest untapped and unrecognized source of all is to be found in the thousands of creative teachers, who in every state of the Union have made new patterns to meet the needs of their own rural pupils, because to them every child was a precious thing, to be respected and understood and guided upward and forward, and because they themselves delighted in and knew the art of rich living in a rural environment. If we could bring together the ideas which their intelligence and zeal have evolved, and make them available to all teachers, we could, I believe, advance rural education a generation. (p. 245)

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