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Education In and Through Agriculture

By J. W. GIBSON, M.A. Director of Elementary Agricultural Education, British Columbia

N the June number of the Agricultural Gazette, Mr. John Dearness, in his most timely article on "Agriculture as Education," points out some of the dangers and also some of the errors attendant upon the introduction of agriculture in the schools. The case has not been overstated. Agricultural instruction can hardly be said to have more than begun in the schools of Canada and already one sees evidences of mischief and impending failure, chiefly, we think, through a lack of understanding combined with the misdirected enthusiasm of some of its strongest supporters. What we seem to need and need badly is a philosophy of agricultural education. Education in agriculture is comparatively easy of understanding. "Let us have agricul-ture taught in our schools," is the slogan, and many who know more about agriculture than about the true function of schools are leading rashly and blindly on. In too many cases they mistake the means for the end. They have not grasped the important fact that in the public schools, at least there is one thing more important than education in agriculture and that is education through agriculture.

At various times during the last half century attempts have been made to introduce the study of agriculture in the public schools of Canada. The supposition was that agriculture was something that children would do well to know about, hence it never got beyond the stage of good and useful information, dispensed from text-books with a certain amount of doubtful exposition thrown in. Indeed, the instructions issued to teachers in Ontario in 1896, relative to the teaching of agriculture in public schools, specifically stated that the teaching of this subject was to be "by conversation only." Of course, Ontario and the other provinces have got well beyond that stage in the teaching of agriculture but there is a grave danger of our making another mistake and that is what Mr. Dearness has taken occasion to point out. The whole question is too serious and too important to be passed over. There is a right way and we may be sure that it is based upon sound pedagogic principles.

How many teachers of agriculture ever stop to consider the great question of the evolution of interest in-children? "If it is a

good thing to know, then the sooner they learn it the better," seems to be the theory of some agricultural instructors. this is wrong in principle and can never be permanently successful. For example, the scientific feeding of hogs is a fine study and the economic production of pork is a splendid achievement, but it properly belongs to young men and not to little boys and girls of junior or intermediate grade. A certain kind of agricultural propagandist in Canada has failed to recognize or appreciate this fact and the sudden popularity which now attends all efforts on the part of the schools to increase food production seems to give him right of way in the schools. Under war conditions we felt that this should be tolerated and even encouraged, but it is now time that school inspectors and superintendents should think their way through this question of agriculture in the schools and get on to a sound basis of education both in and through agriculture.

Agriculture has wonderful possibilities as a great liberalizing subject of instruction. It stands so close to the first interests of the human race that it is destined to occupy a most important place in the educational systems of the future, but it will never become the great factor and the fine instrument in education which it can and should be unless it is properly organized and intelligently handled. It has its beginnings in primary education in a direct observational study of the things that surround the children and which enter into their daily experience and activity. It includes a knowledge of the plant and animal life of the district and of the soil and later of the processes entering into plant production. Probably no single phrase or term adequately expresses all that we wish to include in the elementary work which logically precedes vocational and economic agriculture, but certainly "nature study" as we understand it today most nearly expresses what we mean. The true teacher who has learned to think with the children and to appreciate their mental processes and above all the normal development of their interests, attitudes and tendencies, makes no dividing line between nature study and agriculture. She thinks of agriculture as nature study specialized and applied-and as it becomes more specialized and operative it obviously may become more economic