

Points of View

Dialogue on Agent Qualifications

Manhattan, Kansas
April 21, 1967

Dear G. L.:

I have just completed budgets in eight of my 11 urban counties. There are some situations developing relative to 4-H that are going to get crucial, in my opinion, and in the near future.

In 4-H, we are insisting that we are "advancing informal educational programs in youth work to make better citizens." This implies that we are interested in the boy and girl, not his calf, bicycle, or dog. Yet we are still sending out agents trained in how to take care of a calf, bicycle, or dog, to train the 4-H member on how to be a better citizen. This seems a little inconsistent. Recently, one of our local executive boards indicated it would be willing to hire someone with a degree in fields other than agriculture. Education and sociology were mentioned as possibilities.

It is also interesting to consider this club agent within the concept of source credibility. Since the crucial items in credibility are trustworthiness and expertise, I think one could logically raise the question of why such a person trained in dairy science, for example, would make good citizens out of boys and girls when he really has no expertise in that field.

I'd be interested in your opinion.

EUGENE ROSS
District Extension Supervisor

Madison, Wisconsin
May 29, 1967

Dear Gene:

I'm interested in your comments on the academic preparation of agents to do youth work. Frankly, I have difficulty separating the what to do (the calf, dress, etc.) from the education in better citizenship. I keep remembering

that historically the Extension worker who has been academically trained to know about agriculture and home economics has by some accident been more effective, in the informal setting, as a developer of citizenship and leadership than have professionals with all sorts of other academic preparation. I'm not certain there's anything much about having been academically trained as an "educationist" or "sociologist."

It may be important to ask what kind of people you're considering employing, as well as what is their academic preparation. It may be appropriate to ask what provides a person expertise in the area of citizenship training. Just because the dairy agent may not have it does not necessarily mean that someone else has. Am I off base?

G. L. CARTER, JR.
Editor

Manhattan, Kansas
July 6, 1967

Dear G. L.:

I am real glad to have the opportunity to pursue the discussion with you, relative to youth agent qualifications. I believe that if our 4-H agents have as their program objective "to make better citizens out of our boys and girls . . .," then they do need the technical competence with which to do it. I will readily admit that training as an "educationist" or "sociologist" (I'm using your terms now) does not in any way guarantee one's ability to reach that objective. I recall that at an adult education seminar a student used to push the dean of Extension in the state into saying that an agent should have a degree in adult education. The dean replied, "I don't care if they have a degree in music as long as they are loyal and can get the job done!"

I agree that probably the kind of degree isn't too important, but it's still pretty hard for me to believe

generally an engineer could make a good child psychologist unless he has had some interest and rigorous training in that area. Would you call a plumber a wire a house for electricity even though some plumbers may do a better job? My point is that while I do not believe that training in the social sciences guarantees a good agent, as a result of my experiences I do believe that the likelihood of his being a better youth agent is increased.

I will admit that we have to some extent been successful in building citizenship, but I believe this has been . . . by some accident . . .," to use your words, rather than a planned procedure to achieve the "better citizenship" objective. Furthermore, our objective in the early life of 4-H was to increase agricultural production and not specifically to produce "better citizens."

Secondly, I believe an agent must have not only technical competence, but ability to plan, execute, and evaluate an educational program to achieve the "better citizenship" objective. I do not believe that training to achieve technical competence guarantees ability. (The ability, I mean what one can do.) To draw an analogy, one of the worst speeches I ever heard was given by a youth teacher. I do not believe I can assess ability too much. While interviewing prospective candidates, I look for ability, desire (i.e., does he want to work), and technical competence, in that order. But how do you measure his ability before he's on the job?

I also believe, as I stated in my previous letter, that the concept of source credibility is extremely important and will be more important in the future. Basically, the concept asserts that unless the receiver (of a communication) believes that the sender (speaker) has expertise in his field and is trustworthy in what he has to say, he will not accept any part of the communication. When someone challenges the expertise of a youth agent trained in agronomy and a teaching and promoting adult working in "child development," what is the challenger going to think?

After thinking about all this, G.L., I want you to know that I really don't

feel "wild" about all this. It seems, although I have no proof, that agents trained in vocational agriculture do a better job as youth agents than do ones trained in a technical field such as dairy science. However, one of our outstanding youth agents has only a dairy science degree. But I believe his success is due to his perceptive ability to comprehend a situation—see what it needs—and, through his innate ability, to plan a good educational program to get the job done. It is for this reason that I ask myself while interviewing personnel prospects, "Has this guy got the ability to do the job?"

I have certainly enjoyed the dialogue with you, G.L. It would be interesting to hear other comments on the academic preparation of agents to do youth work.

EUGENE ROSS

District Extension Supervisor

Madison, Wisconsin
September 5, 1967

Dear Gene:

There are three points in your most recent comments on agent training for youth work on which I would like to comment. First, your comment that generally an engineer would not make a good child psychologist: I agree—if you are referring to what a person academically trained as a child psychologist is to "know." But it may be another matter if the question were in terms of practicing "child psychology" in relationships with young people.

Being trained academically as a child psychologist does not guarantee that such a person can really relate effectively to young people or other adults concerned with young people. What are we looking for in youth agents: Those who can "profess" on an area of study? Or those who can practice effectively relative to an area of study? Or those who can do both? It is my impression that those with formal training in a field such as child psychology are prepared principally to "profess" on the subject; that is basically what their credentials tell us.

Point two: You comment that, in a communication, unless the receiver perceives the sender as having expertise

in his field, the receiver may not accept any part of the communication. I can't argue with that idea as such. But in the case of our discussion, the matter must be more clearly defined. What kind of communications do we expect a youth agent to be sending regarding youth work? And with whom do we expect him to communicate? Is he going to be lecturing someone on child psychology, on citizenship, or on other equally abstract ideas?

How does one become expert in teaching citizenship to young people? Is there an academic preparation for this kind of responsibility? Do we have evidence or clues as to how the dairy science major compares (in his expertise at developing citizenship) with some other group with differing academic preparations? It may not be sufficient to say that the dairy science major is ill prepared for such a responsibility. We've got to ask: Who is better prepared? In order to answer that with any degree of conclusiveness, we need some reliable evidence.

Point three (this one varies somewhat from the topic of training): You say that "our objective in the early life of 4-H was to increase agricultural production and not specifically to produce 'better citizens.'" That's not the way I read the history of 4-H and Extension. I do read pronouncements (plenty of them in recent years) which say what I think you're saying. I have heard 4-H personnel in recent years speak as if we (Extension) have just discovered that there are young people holding on to the calf halters and that, now that we have discovered young people, we will focus our attention on developing *them*—rather than the calf.

As I read early Extension history I'm impressed with the overriding concern the pioneers had for people (and especially young people). Granted, they went about dealing with their concern for young people in conjunction with helping them learn to produce better corn, grow and can tomatoes, raise livestock, sew, etc. But unless I misread, their efforts were focused on *helping young people grow*. It strikes me that overemphasis on raising a calf (instead of a boy) may have crept into

the thinking of Extension personnel in fairly recent years.

You see, I'm not arguing that such attitudes have not existed (or that they do not now exist) but that my interpretation is that it is erroneous to assign that attitude to the early Extension workers who were concerned with 4-H. I would further argue that if Extension is to effectively "develop citizenship" among young people, it may be done in conjunction with something specific and concrete—not by abstraction. Effective citizenship is not learned in abstraction. Perhaps, as much as for any other reason, the genius of 4-H has been manifest by its providing young people bases for experiencing and comprehending abstract ideas in connection with things that are real.

The question still remains: Who will make the best youth worker in the Extension context? Is it the academic preparation that determines who will be an effective youth worker in Extension? The answer is likely not a simple one. What do you say? What academic preparation (field of study) would you propose as being ideal for an Extension youth worker? Are there characteristics other than academic field of study you would consider "as important" or "more important"? What importance would you place on a prospective worker's academic grades?

The points we are discussing are of substantial importance to the Extension Service. I fear that many of the pronouncements, and even judgments being made are not as clearly thought through as may be merited. I'll be interested in your further comments.

G. L. CARTER, JR.
Editor

Seminar Scheduled

Your readers might like to be reminded that the 1968 National Seminar on Adult Education Research will meet in Chicago, February 11-13. All persons interested in planning, conducting, or using research related to the field of adult education are invited to attend this meeting.

GEORGE D. RUMBAUGH
Raleigh, North Carolina