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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes the issues underlying the Amish conflicts with public school consolidation and the enforcement of extended compulsory school-age limits. It calls attention to a long-standing strategy for community control of schools contributing to the maintenance of a culturally divergent minority group tradition. None of the traditional arguments in favor of school consolidation are acceptable. Amish society is localized, formal, and familistic. They are opposed to separating school from life. The Amish struggle to retain the school on a human rather than an organizational scale has centered around four main issues: (1) the location of the school; the Amish insist that their children attend schools located close to their homes, so that children can help with farm work and aspire to become farmers; (2) the training and qualifications of the teacher; in order to teach their way of life, the Amish want to have teachers qualified by their commitment to Amish values; (3) the number of years of schooling; the Amish want education in the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic; and, (4) the content of education; the Amish basically object to having their children trained for a way of life that is contrary to their religion. The Amish have, thus, been able through community discipline and support and protection of their children to maintain cultural continuity and integrity, to remain a discrete minority, steadfast to their own vision of the good life. (Author/RJ)

COUNCIL on ANTHROPOLOGY and EDUCATION NEWSLETTER

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AMISH SCHOOLING: A STUDY IN ALTERNATIVES

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[Ed. Note: Contributing to the recent Supreme Court decision on Amish education was the anthropological testimony of Professor Hostetler. His testimony, both in the Wisconsin and U.S. Courts, helped to protect the rights of the Amish to resist compulsory secondary public education. This paper, prepared for the symposium on "Consequences of Implementing Alternative Schools" at the Society for Applied Anthropology meetings in Montreal, summarizes the issues underlying Amish conflicts with public-school consolidation and the enforcement of extended compulsory school-age limits. It calls attention to a long-standing strategy for community control of schools which contribute to the maintenance of a culturally divergent minority group tradition. Those interested in further ethnographic detail on Amish education should consult the 1971 case study, in collaboration with Gertrude Huntington, listed in the bibliography.]

The Old Order Amish are considered by many as a social fossil. They provide the anthropologist with a case study in culture and education particularly insightful for understanding the processes of identity, its maintenance and denial, and cultural pluralism. "The school," as Jules Henry has ably demonstrated (1963:283-321)," is an institution for drilling children in cultural orientations." Schools are instruments for destroying ethnic solidarity as well as for maintaining it.

The search for alternatives to the monocultural school has begun to take many forms. (Singleton 1971) The Amish model will obviously not fit the requirements of non-Amish culture. Schools apart from culture do not exist except as a mental construct. Thus the relevance for considering the Amish school in this context is not that of any specific technique it has to offer, but the associations which can be made between culture and competency under various conditions.

The dominant themes of Amish culture play an important part in the goals of education. The goals are: "the cultivation of humility, simple living, and resignation to the will of God." Their preferred pattern of partial separation from the larger society enables them to provide for their members a sanctuary from competing value systems. In the face of modern mobility, rootlessness, and anxiety, the Amish protect their members against the value systems of middle-class society. In order to survive in an industrial nation like the United States, they, like other ethnic groups, have had not only to retreat to spatial and psychic togetherness, but to educate their children for social cohesion. The Amish did not establish their own schools until they were threatened by the monocultural public school that would not grant them an identity of their own and would not permit them to be raised both as Amishmen and as Americans. As long as the public schools were small in size and on a human rather than organizational scale--therefore local in character--the Amish exerted an influence in the public school as had the Swedes and Finns in other localities. As the administrative unit became larger through consolidation, small, culturally divergent groups were subordinated to the larger numbers of middle-class Americans. They lost their influence over the style, as well as the policies, of the schools that serve their children.

Half of the Amish pupils in the United States, however, are still in public schools in rural areas. Since 1950 they founded over 300 schools that today have an estimated enrollment of 10,000 pupils. Where the Amish were successful in their attempt to modify the public-school system, their children remained in the public school and thus

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continued to be taught by state-certified teachers. They were in an educational situation in which their distinctive culture was respected while they were at the same time introduced to aspects of middle-class American society. Where the state school officials remained rigid and made little attempt to understand or work with the Amish, the Amish withdrew completely from the public schools and built and staffed their own schools. They withdrew because of changes (in public school philosophy and organization) that threatened their cultural identity and not because they wanted the school to accomplish the task of teaching religion.

The Amish have suffered repeatedly at the hands of school officials who have not understood their concern for education (Erickson 1969), or the distinctions they make between technology and wisdom, between the critical analytical method and the quest for social coherence in their community life. In a world filled with instruments of bureaucratic control, "There seems to be no hiding place left, no place of refuge where defenseless Christians can cultivate the life of simple obedience and hard work without being molested." (Littell 1969: 64)

Of six main arguments in favor of school consolidation (Loomis and Beegle 1950: 590-591), none are acceptable to the Amish:

1. "Equalization of costs between the poorer and wealthier district." The Amish do not care if their district is financially poor, for simplicity and modesty are considered virtues.

2. "Better teachers." The Amish do not believe that higher education necessarily produces better teachers, nor that higher salaries insure greater competence.

3. "Superior curricula." The Amish consider the curriculum of the larger schools inferior, for it usually stresses science and lauds technology.

4. "Specialization of instruction and grading of pupils by age groups." The Amish are opposed to specialized instruction, preferring that their children learn only the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic. They consider it a disadvantage to group children only with their agemates rather than letting them associate in a mixed group, where the younger children can learn from the older and the older children can help the younger.

5. "Social advantages to pupils and to the community." This is considered a danger rather than an advantage, because the Amish wish their children to follow in their own footsteps and not to move on to other occupations or higher-status jobs.

6. "Better administration and superior vision." The Amish are suspicious of administration, for they believe that agreements should be informal and based on the work of the parties concerned. There is little need for administration in small face-to-face groups. The Amish also believe the vision of administrative officials to be inferior rather than superior, for it usually is progress-oriented and based on an exclusive belief in the scientific method.

Amish society is localized, informal, and familistic. They are opposed to separating school from life. The Amish struggle to retain the school on a human rather than an organizational scale has centered around four major issues:

1. The location of the school. The Amish insist that their children attend schools located close to their homes in an agricultural environment, so that children can help with the farm work and aspire to become farmers, for farming is a basic tenet in the Amish way of life. Consolidation threatens the homogeneous character of the Amish community and exposes the children to alien values. To avoid these perils the Amish founded one- and two-room private schools.

2. The training and qualifications of the teacher. In order to teach their way of life, the Amish want to have teachers qualified by their commitment to Amish values. Their method of teaching is largely based on example and learning by doing. Persons qualified by state standards are incapable of teaching the Amish way of life by the example of their lives.

3. The number of years of schooling. The Amish want their children educated in the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic in elementary school. All training beyond that, they say, should be conducive to the Amish religion and way of life. Conflict developed over the number of years of schooling when states raised the age requirement from 14 to 16 and in some instances to 18 years.

4. The content of education. The Amish basically object to having their children trained for a way of life that is contrary to their religion. "Public or free schools," they say, "are intended only to impart worldly knowledge, to insure earthly success, and to make good citizens for the state." The Amish say it is the duty of the church-community to prepare their children to live spiritually in this life and for eternity.

Our study of Amish socialization practices (Hostetler and Huntington 1971) reveals that: (1) Amish pupils have a positive self-image within their culture and identify with the larger American culture without emulating its total likeness. (2) Amish pupils manifest trusting rather than alienated relationships. (3) Measures of personality traits show Amish types to be quiet, friendly, responsible, conscientious, patient with detail, concerned with how other people feel. (4) Amish pupils scored higher than pupils in rural public schools in the basic skills--arithmetic, spelling, and word usage. (5) Amish teach largely by example, not primarily by preachment. (6) The Amish young aspire to become adults and follow the occupations of their parents.

Unlike the Indian, the black, the Chicano, or the Puerto Rican, the Old Order Amish have suffered neither a profound cultural jolt nor a weakening of their self-image. Nor have they felt the need to change their identity. In assessing the role of education and self-identity it is important to remember that the blacks and others are going through a process of community development involving a change of identity. What could better express their desire for a change than their insistence on using a new label to designate their people? The Negroes have become "blacks," and the "Mexican-Americans" are striving to be known as "Chicanos." In Goodenough's terms they are clearing their "social decks" so that they can do something positive about creating a new identity for themselves (Goodenough 1961: 93). They do not want to be assimilated into the larger culture, but want instead to maintain the distinctive aspects of their own culture while participating in the economy of the dominant culture. The concept of the school as the pot in which the cultures melt works well for those who wish to--and who are able to--merge their identity with the American middle class, but for others the concept is totalitarian if not obsolescent.

When culturally different children attend a school that teaches an unattainable identity, an identity that would demand the rejection of the values of the home, the tribe, or the street, and even the color of their skin, what can be the resultant self-image? When the child is forced to choose between the culture in which he has spent his first five years, the culture of the real life of the home and its environment, and the artificial and, to him, often meaningless culture of the school, he generally rejects the school and with it, all formal education.

The Amish have been able to stop, at least temporarily, the onslaught of the large school and its associated values. They have scant legal protection and little guarantee other than public sentiment for the maintenance of their schools, in which their children are learning the skills and attitudes required of their culture. Were it not for the Amish appeal to religious freedom and nostalgic American values, their communities would long

since have been forced out of their pastoral "poverty" into the economic mainstream, where they would have added to the welfare rolls already swelled with unhappy individuals drifting between the culture they no longer have and the middle-class culture they do not fully embrace. Instead the Amish have been able, through community discipline and community support of their members and by the careful protection and nurture of their children, to maintain cultural continuity and cultural integrity, to remain a discrete minority, steadfast to their own vision of the good life.

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