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ABSTRACT

An essential aspect of Old Order Mennonite identity is located in the historical-cultural understanding of who they are as one group of God's people. Schooling is an intentional means of reinforcing this understanding, and it is finely tuned to prepare children for the Old Order way of life. As such, it emphasizes basic academics, acquisition of responsibility, and respect for authority. The school serves a well-defined, largely egalitarian, and homogeneous constituency that has no need of sorting or credentialling in its schools to maintain its way of life. The mission of the school is both utilitarian and transparent, and, therefore, it can be a nurturing place; no one's future economic or social status will be determined by his or her performance there. Formal education in the school is only one form of education within a community of practice and is not viewed as the most critical. With respect to vocational preparation and community values, what is learned at home, in the workplace, and within the social relations of the community is viewed as most important. What is learned in the school has much to do with values, and these values are continuous with other forms of learning in the community so that the border between school and community life is a permeable one. By situating the process of formal schooling within the community of practice, the Old Order Mennonites ensure that education is continuous with practice. (TD)

# Educating for Identity & Resistance: Situated Learning among the Old Order Mennonites

The purpose of this paper is to describe the ways in which Old Order Mennonite education in Rockingham County, Virginia has been structured to nurture a distinct identity which is defined both in terms of values embraced by the community and in terms of resistance to the values of the majority culture. As will be seen, Old Order Mennonite education is firmly located in the context of the community and, as such, can best be understood through the lens of Dewey's notion of educating indirectly through the social environment, and Lave and Wenger's conception of education within a community of practice.

## Riverdale Church

It is a Sunday morning in early April and I am driving to Riverdale Church which is about a twenty minutes from my home. As I turn west on to Route 257 coming out of Dayton, I begin to see fewer and fewer cars, and more and more horse drawn carriages, which, at first, I pass carefully. Finally, though, when I'm within about a mile of the church there's a steady stream of carriages ahead of me and I just fall in line with them, driving at a stately–most of the horses are former race horses–eighteen miles an hour. There are streams of carriages coming from all directions. Up until this time, I have only see one or two carriages at a time. This morning I begin to realize that the Old Order community is considerably larger than I had imagined.

I feet a bit odd being the only person to drive up the lane to the church in a car and being the only person not dressed in traditional Old Order clothing. But I am greeted

outside the church by one of the elders, the harness-maker, whom I had met previously and who will be preaching the sermon this morning. The harness-maker asks another elder of the church to take me inside and to sit with me. I had planned to remain inconspicuous, sitting at the back of the church, but he takes me up to his regular seat at the front. The church–or meeting house as it is called–is plain, as I had expected, polished wooden floors, banks of windows along each side since there were no electric lights, rows of benches, a single long table on a slightly raised platform at the front. It is also quite a bit larger than I had expected and my guess is that there are several hundred people in attendance. The men and older boys are seated on one side of the church, women and children on the other.

The church service, also, is simple. Several hymns are sung, simple tunes without musical accompaniment. There are several prayers during which the congregation spins around in their sets and gets on their knees; it happens so fast that I am always several seconds behind. A few Bible passages, the sermon. The harness-maker studies all week in preparation for the sermon but he makes no notes and he has no outline when he gets up to preach. What needs to be said this morning in the sermon will be said and determined by the immediacy of the moment. I have been warned to expect a long, rambling sermon, but it is neither. The harness-maker moves easily between his New Testament text and passages from the Old Testament which illustrate the points he is making. He obviously knows the scripture well. He is a good speaker and he holds my attention. I do not find myself drifting into my usual pattern of day-dreaming during the sermon.

After the service I stand out in front of the church and talk to a number of men who come up to greet me. They are friendly, glad to have me there, interested to know who I am, and I am feeling neither odd nor unwelcome. Afterwards, I am invited to dinner along with eighteen other people. There are four generations present and we share a large meal set on several tables joined together in my host's kitchen. Everything is fresh and it's all made from scratch. Someone spent a long time preparing this meal. The afternoon is

spent eating and visiting. Learning that I am originally from Boston, one of the older men tells me about his experiences working in alternative service on a farm in southern New Hampshire during World War II. His wife talks of one of her brothers who, inexplicably, was denied conscientious objector status and spent the duration of the war in a federal penitentiary. I keep thinking of all the things I have to do but no one seems to be in a hurry to get going. Sunday afternoon is a time for fellowship and rest.

## Who Are the Old Order Mennonites of Virginia?

The Old Order Mennonites are an Anabaptist group; other Anabaptist groups include the various branches of the Mennonite Church, the Church of the Brethren, the Amish, and the Hutterites. Although quite different in their contemporary lifestyles, interpretation of Christian mission, and philosophies of engagement with society, these groups share a common heritage as an outgrowth of the radical wing of the Protestant Reformation. The radical wing of the Reformation was characterized by, among other attributes, a belief in the separation of Church and State, non-resistance, egalitarianism, and the rejection of church hierarchy. During the Reformation, Anabaptist groups were severely persecuted by both the Catholic and Protestant churches because of their refusal to adhere to the church membership requirements of the state. Their history has been characterized by a series of migrations throughout Europe and then to North America in search of the freedom to practice their religious beliefs without interference from the State. A prominent characteristic of Anabaptist groups, then, has been non-conformity and intentional–though non-violent–resistance to the majority which has generally defined as the State.

The formation of the Old Order Mennonite Church in Virginia can be traced to 1901 when the Old Order churches split off from the Virginia Conference of the

Mennonite Church. Much of the controversy centered around a particular bishop who was introducing reforms that were objectionable to more conservative members of the church. After several years of rising disagreement about the direction which the church was taking, a group of church members was excommunicated for refusing to identify with the Virginia Mennonite Conference.

The Old Order movement, then, arose in response to the acculturation of the Mennonite Church to certain beliefs, values and practices of mainline Protestantism which, in turn, were perceived to reflect the values of American society. The differences between the Old Order movement and what had become the progressive mainstream of the Mennonite Church had less to do with theology than they did with the interpretation of how Anabaptism was to be lived out. The Old Order movement represented a deliberate resistance to the accommodation which was taking place to American life which was increasingly characterized by individualism, consumerism, reliance on technology and acculturation to the world rather than separation from it. It was an effort to preserve the values and the way of life of traditional Anabaptism apart from which, it was believed, the theology of Anabaptism would quickly and easily erode.

Members of the Old Order movement objected strongly to some of the practices of mainline evangelical Protestantism which were being eagerly adopted by the leadership of the Mennonite Church. These included many familiar religious practices which have since become institutionalized in–and inseparable from–the identity of the Protestant churches in America such as the Sunday School movement, evangelistic outreach, and church music which accommodated secular tunes and tended to promote individual soloists. To members of the Old Order movement these practices represented the invasion of values which were in direct opposition to their understanding of biblical faith.

For example, the Sunday School movement which tended to be characterized by postmillenialism and an expansive spirit religious not only of conquest, but of integration with American society and its project of prideful, materialistic and militaristic nation-

building, was rejected by the Old Order movement because it threatened to bring people into the church whose understanding of, and commitment to, biblical faith was suspect and untested by community life. Furthermore, the popularized curriculums of the Sunday School movement were developed by national publishing houses and thus removed biblical teaching and interpretation from the context of a practicing religious community.

Although these practices may now seem like an integral part of the life and the mission of the church, they represented, for more conservative Mennonites, an accommodation to prevailing cultural values including individualism, worldly ambition , pride, selfishness, and reliance on the methods of the world whether it involved church work or work in farming and the trades. This cluster of American values which was penetrating the church in the form of programs which would help the church to more efficiently reach out to the world appeared to more conservative Mennonites to be, rather, an accommodation to the values of the world which threatened their emphasis on community, simplicity, hard work, mutual aid, and non-resistance–in general, a lifestyle that limits individual behavior which would be harmful to the maintenance of community.

## Schooling in the Old Order Community

Mountain View School is the largest of three Old Order Schools which have been established by the Old Order Mennonite community in Rockingham County. Each of these is a two room country school house, accommodating grades one through eight, and associated with an Old Order congregation located in the same area. Mountain View School is a plain white clapboard building set on a grassy school yard of about two acres beside a gravel road. The school yard is dotted with large shade trees and encloses a rudimentary softball diamond, a see-saw and several swings, and a few hitching posts. It

is located in an area of prosperous and productive farms, spread over rolling hills, with views of mountains on all sides in the distance.

## *The Establishment of the Old Order Schools*[1]

The establishment of the first Old Order school, Mountain View School, took place in 1968 as a result of two amendments which were made to the state's compulsory school attendance law that same year. The first amendment lengthened the required terminal age for schooling from fourteen to sixteen. The second amendment had the effect–as interpreted by the Rockingham County School Board–of eliminating the right of parents to remove their children from school based on their own conscientious objections to further education, and subjecting removal from school to an administrative proceeding which would involve the school principal, the superintendent of schools, and the judge of the juvenile and domestic relations court.

The Old Order community won the right to remove their children from the public schools only after hiring a lawyer who took their appeal directly to the Superintendent of Public Instruction in Richmond and several subsequent appeals made through legal channels. This decision was made on the basis that the Old Order objection to higher education did represent a conscientious objection to "higher education" which was clearly inherent to their religious belief.

[1] The material in this section is drawn from Showalter, W. (1973), and from conversations with members of the Old Order community.

## *Aims of the School*

The *Constitution and By-Laws of the Mountain View Mennonite School* are contained in a small pamphlet measuring 3"x 5" and containing 10 pages. Article II–Founding Purposes and Aim–states that,

> The school was founded to provide an environment for children which would be most conducive in preparing them for the Old Order Mennonite way of life and the responsibilities of adulthood. These standards are designed to establish the foundations of a society of useful, God-fearing and law-abiding citizens.

One church member, responding to a questionnaire administered by Welby Showalter as background for his 1973 report referenced above, stated that the purpose of the school is "to produce generations that are capable of leading useful, peaceful, quiet, self-supporting lives in the midst of an ever-changing world." What constitutes usefulness must be viewed in the context of the Old Order community where the primary occupation is farming and a few basic trades such as harness-making and repair, carriage making, carpentry, and mechanical repair. Women work at home where they are engaged in raising children, helping with work on the farm, gardening, sewing, canning, and cooking. Usefulness, then, applies to activities which are basic to the maintenance of a way life characterized by simplicity and peace.

The aims of the school are to support this way of life and so the curriculum, as discussed below, is intentionally basic. What the Old Order community does not want to accomplish in its schools is what is sometimes referred to as "higher education." Higher education is a level of education which, because it exceeds the requirements for the occupational and faith life of the community, leads to needless speculation and rationalism and the placing of reason above revelation, encourages the questioning of the authority and tradition which exists in, and is determined through, the life of the

community, and can lead to specialized, exclusive forms of knowledge which may set the individual apart from–and in some eyes, above–the rest of the community. One respondent to Welby Showalter's questionnaire wrote:

> We do not feel we can get too much (of the right kind of) knowledge. The right kind would be to be of service to humanity for the honor and glory of God. Proverbs 4:7–Wisdom is the principal thing: therefore get wisdom; and with all thy getting, get understanding.

Children are encouraged to do their best in school, as they would be in any task since striving to do well is considered to be a matter of duty, but competitiveness or comparison to others with respect to school performance is discouraged. This is reflected in comments on the questionnaires administered by Welby Showalter in response to the place of performance and competitiveness in the school:

> Students are encouraged to do their best, not for honor or praise of man, but for their own good.
>
> We surely encourage the pupils to use their God-given talent to the best of their ability, but do not encourage competitiveness.

Given that, occupationally, students will be involved in farming, homemaking, and basic trades, performance in the classroom is tied neither to admittance to differing professional and economic strata, nor is it a predictor of one's future success. Rather the application of academic training to the practical challenges of one's occupation and the evidence of valued character traits such as honesty and fairness are considered the important outcomes of education.

## *School Administration*

As mentioned above, there are three Old Order schools in the Rockingham County area around Dayton: Mountain View, Hickory Hollow, and Oak Lane. Each school is

associated with, and located close by, one on the three Old Order congregations. The schools are individually administered by a school board composed of three fathers who have children in the school, each chosen by a secret ballot of the church membership, for a staggered three year term. School board members may not serve more than one consecutive term.

The responsibilities of the School Board include the general supervision of the school, selection of teachers, approving the curriculum in consultation with the teachers, administration of the finances, and the maintenance of school property. With respect to finances, the cost to educate a student is made known and parents pay what they can, with any difference in the annual budget being made up by the congregation. The Board may also become involved in matters of school discipline when the situation has gotten beyond the ability of the teacher and the family to solve. The Board meets with the teachers every six weeks to discuss such issues, and meets with the teachers and parents three times each year.

The Board is also responsible for maintaining attendance records for inspection by the state (although one of the teachers told me that no one ever bothers to look at them– she said that the only people who ever show up from the state are from the Health Department, coming to check the purity of the water). Insuring that students are in school is the sole requirement which the school must meet on behalf of the state. One Board member told me that they are periodically approached by representatives of the state educational system offering funding for various types of programs but they always turn them down out of concern that funding will also bring unwanted state involvement in the school.

There is no on-site school administration since each school house has only two teachers but, in practice, the more senior teacher at each school may function as a principal in the sense of serving as a mentor and a resource, but not in the sense of having

charge over the other teacher. Each teacher also has an assistant, generally a recent graduate of the school, who comes into the class three days each week.

## *The Teachers*

According to the constitution of the school, a teacher must be a member in good standing in the church and must have a desire to impart knowledge, implant character and love to work with children. Teachers have an eighth grade education and are not required to be certified by the state. They are, rather, chosen by the community based on the criteria above. Christian, the teacher with whom I talked the most, graduated from Mountain View School in 1995, which would make him about nineteen or twenty. After working at home on the farm for a couple of years, he was asked to consider working three days a week at the school as an assistant in the grades five through eight classroom. There he assisted a senior teacher for two years and, when she retired, he was asked to be the teacher. He has now been teaching for two years but will not be teaching much longer because he has been asked by the harness maker if he would come work for him and eventually take over the business. He also indicated that the salary of a teacher, though adequate for a single person, was not enough to support a family. A member of the School Board told me that retaining teachers was becoming difficult since most teachers are women who do not want to continue teaching once they get married and begin having children. Thus, most of the teachers are young and not yet married, or are women whose children are older and who can take the time away from work in the home and on the farm.

*In the Classroom*

There are seventeen students in the upper grade class, fairly evenly spread between the four grades. The classroom is orderly and contains seventeen polished wooden desks in four rows, the teacher's desk in a corner at the back of the room. The two outside walls are lined with windows, the two inside walls with blackboards and displays. There are no computers nor is there any other classroom "technology" in evidence. It is a simple classroom, but not austere.

The curriculum of the school is determined by the teachers in consultation with the school board. In practice, the Board sets general policy and the teachers work out the curriculum. The only guidance which the school constitution provides in terms of curriculum is the following:

> The School shall give the Bible as much place as is expedient in its curriculum to develop moral Christian character. It shall encourage the students to make it their constant companion, and its precepts their rule of life.

In practice, this guideline is actualized by using curriculum that is developed specifically for Christian schools and which seeks to provide a Christian perspective on each subject which include English, math, science, history, and health. Again, the emphasis is on the development of practical knowledge and skills which will be useful in the context of the Old Order way of life. One respondent to the Welby Showalter questionnaire described the curriculum as being composed of,

> Reading, writing, arithmetic, spelling, history, English, singing, memorizing Scripture verses and poetry, with an emphasis on doing unto others as we would have others do unto us.

The teachers use several different publishing houses and appear to tinker continuously with the curriculum, seeking material which is effective in its pedagogy and which is in

agreement with Old Order values. For example, the teacher of the upper grades told me that although he likes much of the material from one publishing house in the social sciences, he found the text on American history to be too "patriotic" and so he decided not to use it.

Students are grouped in the room by grade level. Teaching multiple grades in the same classroom means that the teacher spends some time with one group, introducing new material or explaining difficult material, while students in the other grades work at their desks. Much of the curriculum appears to lend itself to a self-paced approach. Since the teacher may be busy introducing material to one grade, each student has a red pennant mounted on a magnet at their desk which they can raise if they have a question, rather than having to keep their hand up for an extended period of time. Homework is not given because it is felt that the time allotted for schooling should be sufficient to master the material. In addition, children have chores which must be taken care of when they get home from school and, as one teacher pointed, they also need some time for themselves.

There is frequent testing, using materials which are part of the curriculum. One of the jobs of the teacher assistants is to do much of the routine grading. Students are advanced to the next class annually if they have demonstrated competence in the material for their grade. Students are rarely held back to repeat a grade, although this does happen occasionally, always in consultation with the family. In order to complete the requirements of the state for attendance, a student must either complete eighth grade or stay in school until age sixteen.

The school also administers standardized achievement tests which indicate that student achievement is greater than that in the public schools. One of the respondents to the questionnaire administered by Welby Showalter, when asked how the Old Order schools compared to the public schools, stated, "I don't have any way of comparing the two, which to us doesn't make any difference because a good basic education is all we feel is necessary." But the respondent went on to cite results of the California Achievement

Test which were higher than those in the surrounding public schools, indicating that the Old Order community is aware of, and concerned about, the amount of learning taking place at their schools in comparison to some external benchmark. One teacher told me that the results of these tests are important because if they show that the school is falling behind the public schools, the state could step in and either close the school or take some action to improve its performance. Based on my understanding of the state guidelines under which the school operates, however, attendance figures are the only records which the state reserves the right to examine.

## *Community*

Given that the shared life of community is an important Old Order value, the ungraded classroom, where few all-class activities can take place, would not seem to be a classroom structure supportive of those values. However, there are several all-class activities during the day. One is the devotional period during which the teacher leads a period of Bible reading, singing, and prayer. A second is lunch, which each grade eats at their desks. A third is the sharing of daily chores for the cleaning and maintenance of the classroom.

A major contributor to the sense of community, however, is recess, which takes place both in the morning and in the afternoon, separately for each classroom. And recess, when the weather is good, means softball. The railing on the inside stairway of the school is lined with baseball gloves and at recess everyone grabs their glove and heads out to the softball diamond. Each week, two captains are appointed to chose the teams, to insure that players are given the chance to play different positions in the field, and to take responsibility for the equipment. The teacher of the older class plays catcher.

Everyone plays and everyone seems to play well, since they have all grown up playing softball. The fielding, especially, evidences considerable skill with very few balls,

be they ground balls or fly balls, missed. The throwing is crisp and accurate, and even a hit into the outfield rarely gets a batter beyond first base–even though the entire field slopes downward just past the infield. The girls play barefoot, in their pretty print dresses, long braids of hair flying behind them. They have grown up playing with the boys and so they play just like the boys and they play with the same intensity, pummeling the ball when they are at bat, running as fast as they can around the bases, throwing the ball hard to try to get to a runner out.

## The Situated School

Like Dewey (1915), Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger have focused on the importance of educating through a social environment, refining the idea of the environment to the concept of the community of practice. They have used the term *legitimate peripheral participation* to describe a situated learning environment in which "learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners" and where "the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practice of the community" (1991:29). Legitimate peripheral participation is frequently associated with apprenticeship but it is not so much the historical form of apprenticeship that provides a lens for understanding legitimate peripheral participation as it is the practice of apprenticeship in which "social practice is the primary, generative phenomenon, and learning is one of its characteristics" (1991:34). Learning, then, is less an activity–whether it be observing the work of the master or performing a variety of basic tasks to build up an understanding of the whole–than it is active involvement in a total social practice or, in Dewey's terms to become "possessed by the emotional attitude of the group" (1915:14). Legitimate peripheral participation, then, is neither an

educational form nor a pedagogical strategy nor a teaching technique; it is, rather, a way of understanding learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991:40).

The Old Order Mennonite Church is one example of such a community of practice where much of a person's learning takes place indirectly through the social environment. Formal education in the Old Order community does not appear to be so very different from what goes on in most other schools. Students study the usual subjects–math, science, English, social studies, sit in a classroom divided by grade, and are instructed formally by a teacher. What is different, however, is the way this formal education is situated in the community of practice.

First of all, classroom education has a more practical orientation to the immediate needs of life which are relevant because children grow up working around the home and farm or shop and have a context within which they can understand the need for certain principles, say, of mathematics or science. Given that they are a highly visible and distinct minority group, social studies help children to locate their community within the broader context of world history and American society. While in school, children already know what skills they will need as adults. Through such exposure to reality, their motivation to learn is strong because they can see how what they are learning is useful to them in their lives.

Such a community of practice provides a high level of motivation, for learners at all levels, for several reasons (1991:110). First, these represent practitioner communities where learners participate in productive activity. This productive activity is not simply the cultivation of spiritual life–in the case of a monastery–but participation in all those tasks required in order for the community to function. Second, apprentice learners know that there is a "mature field" which they are learning to do, a "real world" place and a future which they are experiencing as soon as they enter the community of practice. Third, there is a strong sense of motivation which comes from becoming part of the community, from one's identity with it, from being able to identify masters who embody

what they are growing toward and who give meaning to the mundane tasks and disparate aspects of community that in isolation seem to have no meaning. Finally, learning in such a community practice may take on a more implicit, organic and natural form rather than what Dewey described as a "separate, conscious business." In a community of practice, where the practice is transparent and accessible to the learner, learning by observation results not in a literal and narrow effect but in a rich and full intuitive understanding of the whole and of how each part is linked with it, a learning situation in which "learning and a sense of identity are inseparable" (1991:115).

Secondly, formal education in the school is acknowledged as only one form of education within a community of practice and it is not viewed as the most critical. With respect to vocational preparation and community values, what is learned at home, in the workplace, and in the social relations of the community as a whole is viewed as most important because it is in these contexts that knowledge is lived out–and it is in the living out that the worth of something is proven. What is learned in the school has much to do with values and these values are continuous with other forms of learning in the community so that the border between school and community life is a permeable one. By situating the entire process of formal schooling within the community of practice, the Old Order Mennonites ensure that education is continuous with practice. Finally, because formal schooling does not have the importance in shaping a person's future that schooling generally does in the larger society, there is less pressure both on the student and on the school to produce results. The non-transparent sorting and certification process is not present and so the highly conflicted environment described above tends not to exist in the school.

## Conclusions

An essential aspect of Old Order Mennonite identity is located in the historical-cultural understanding of who they are as one group of God's people. Schooling is an intentional means of reinforcing this understanding, and it is finely tuned to prepare children for the Old Order way of life. As such, its emphasis is on basic academics, the acquisition of practical and useful knowledge, the development of character, the assumption of responsibility, and respect for authority. The school serves a well-defined, largely egalitarian, and homogeneous constituency which has no need of sorting or credentialling in its schools in order to maintain its way of life. The mission of the school is both utilitarian and transparent, and therefore it is able to be a nurturing place; no one's future economic or social status will be determined by their performance there. Finally, the situated nature of this schooling within a community of practice enhances its effect on a process of identity construction which is consistent with the self-understandings and the values of the community

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