



The Experiences of Low German-speaking Mennonite Men in Alternative Education Programs in Southwestern Ontario

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Abstract

The tradition of leaving high school and finding full-time employment after grade 8 has put Low German-speaking (LGS) Mennonites in rural Southwestern Ontario in a vulnerable economic position. Consequently, alternative education programs have been developed by Ontario public school boards in areas containing high numbers of LGS Mennonites. The programs strive to keep LGS Mennonite youth in school by creating spaces where primarily male LGS Mennonite students feel more comfortable and can pursue a high school diploma while maintaining their religious beliefs, cultural identity, and work responsibilities. This article draws from qualitative interview data and open-ended survey responses to explore perceptions of LGS Mennonite men's experiences in alternative education programs, and it highlights factors that caused the men to avoid or leave the programs. This article offers recommendations on how to strengthen the programs to increase the number of LGS Mennonite students attending them. It emphasizes the importance of LGS Mennonite students receiving strong messages from educators that their language, culture, and religious beliefs are valued even if that means separating the youth from Canadian society rather than integrating them on equal terms to minimize their marginalization.

Introduction

Low German-speaking (LGS) Mennonites have had a tumultuous relationship with Canadian educational institutions throughout history, resulting in a large portion of the population migrating from Canada to Mexico and other regions of Latin America in the 1920s. Since the 1950s, waves

of LGS Mennonites have been returning to Canada, with 40,000 now living in rural Southwestern Ontario (Steiner, 2015, p. 43). Male and female LGS Mennonite youth typically attend school until the age of 13 or 14 then leave to work in the Mennonite community (men) or household (women) under the tutelage of their same-gendered parent (Bennett, 2010; Crocker, 2013). Early school leaving has contributed to the vulnerability of the LGS Mennonite communities in Southwestern Ontario where members struggle with low levels of literacy, employment, poverty, housing, and linguistic minority status (Bennett, 2010; Draper, 2010; Turner, 2012). In a world where a high school diploma is the minimal requirement employers expect from prospective employees, those without a diploma are left in a vulnerable economic position. Consequently, alternative education programs have been developed by Ontario public school boards in areas containing high numbers of LGS Mennonites. The alternative education programs strive to keep LGS Mennonite students in school by creating separate classrooms and schedules for the youth so that they can pursue a high school diploma while maintaining their religious beliefs, cultural identity, and work responsibilities. In practice, the programs prepare primarily male students for work in agriculture and skilled trades through applied courses. Although these alternative education programs have opened up an avenue for many conservative Mennonite students who do not feel comfortable attending a public secondary school, attendance has been lower than expected (Mennonite Central Committee [MCC], 2014) with the programs often being tolerated, rather than embraced by the Mennonite community (Turner, 2012).

This article presents the findings of a qualitative study that examined LGS Mennonite men's perceptions of their experiences in alternative education programs. More specifically, the article highlights factors that cause LGS Mennonite men to avoid or leave the alternative education programs and offers recommendations on how to strengthen the programs to increase the number of LGS Mennonite men attending them. Data for the study were collected through interviews specifically with LGS Mennonite men who are attending, have left or have avoided alternative education programs in the Elmira, Listowel, and Drayton areas of Southwestern Ontario, as well as open-ended survey responses from teachers and educational support workers. By making the experiences of these LGS Mennonite men and their views regarding alternative education programs — and education in general — known, public high schools in rural Ontario can continue to develop inclusive spaces that are reflective of the lifestyle of Mennonite men to better equip them for paid work off of the declining family farm.

Coming from a conservative Mennonite background, the lead author of this article, Cameron Brubacher, understands the faith-based decision of LGS Mennonites to remain distinct from mainstream society, as well as some of the worries that they have about public education. However, as a teacher in Southwestern Ontario, he has also witnessed students from this population struggling academically and leaving school early. The study focused specifically on LGS Mennonite men with familial roots in Mexico, who form the majority of students in alternative education programs. In this respect, the article does not challenge Mennonite views on gender, but does acknowledge that the “inequalities between adult men and women are, in part at least, the product of inequalities established and perpetuated through the education system” (Jordan, 1995, p. 69). A strong division of labour exists in Mennonite communities with men doing

paid work and women taking care of the household. Although LGS Mennonite women tend to leave school early as well, activities such as banking, healthcare appointments, and communicating with their children's teachers encourage them to interact with "outsiders." Women are also more likely to attend support groups such as English as a Second Language (ESL) classes which teach them how to navigate Canadian society.

Throughout the article reference is made to a large body of theoretical and empirical literature published over the past 20 years — primarily in the United Kingdom and the United States — that has focused on working-class boys' academic underachievement, with particular attention being given to their attitudes and behaviours (Epstein, 1998; McDowell, 2012; Roberts, 2013; Skelton, 1998; Ward, 2015, 2017). Changes in employment patterns, the economy and the family are all said to have impacted upon traditional forms of working-class masculinity (Skelton, 1998). One often-discredited outcome of the working-class boy literature is the theory that students learn better and develop more positive attitudes when grouped with others like themselves (i.e., streaming; Krahn & Taylor, 2007). Educators following this line of reasoning encourage students who are less academically inclined to take the level of course that best meets their learning needs and which allows them to develop to the fullest of their abilities (Krahn & Taylor, 2007). The article also borrows from studies of the processes by which farming the land are constructed as masculine spheres (Brandth, 1995; Liepins, 1998; Ní Laoire, 2002; Peter, Bell, Jarnagin, & Bauer, 2000).

Low German-speaking Mennonites from Mexico: Commonalities and Diversity

The Mennonite movement was born out of the 16th Century Protestant Reformation. Departing from the newly formed Protestant Church, the Anabaptists (as they are also known) were persecuted for their religious beliefs and forced to migrate first to Eastern Europe and then to North and South America (Good Gingrich & Lightman, 2006). While Mennonites vary significantly in their specific beliefs and practices, there are common threads that unite them such as a more literal interpretation of the Bible, the belief in adult baptism, pacifism and non-resistance, a highly patriarchal social order, as well as a deep respect for tradition and the expectation that its members will live in accordance with that tradition (Dyck, 1993; Good Gingrich & Lightman, 2006; Hiebert Rempel, 2014; Johnson-Weiner, 2007; Loewen Reimer, 2008; Redekop, 1989; Will, 1997). Low German-speaking (LGS) Mennonites, who are primarily from northern Mexico, but also other Latin American countries such as Paraguay, Bolivia, and Argentina, are one sect in the greater Mennonite movement in Canada. Within LGS Mennonite colonies, there are a number of distinct groups including the Reinländer, Chortitzer, Sommerfelder, Kleine Gemeinde, the Bergthaler, and Old Colony Mennonites, all of whom vary in their degrees of conservativeness (Draper, 2010; Sneath, 2004). The Low German language, also known as Plautdietsch, loosely ties the distinct groups together.

Although more liberal than their counterparts who still live in Latin America, LGS Mennonites in Southwestern Ontario typically live a life of simplicity, modesty, and humility (Draper, 2010). They strive to maintain an agrarian lifestyle, wear plain dress, and some colonies

forbid the use of motorized vehicles for transportation. The latest wave of immigration to Canada from Mexico does not appear to be a faith-based mass migration, but one born of economic hardship. Among other circumstances, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has deprived the LGS Mennonites of a significant market by allowing cheap agricultural products to flow into Mexico from the United States (Janzen, 2004). Often landless in Mexico, many families come to Canada hoping to earn and save enough money to buy land for farming or to repay debts (Bennett, 2010). Many LGS Mennonites are newcomers to Canada, but since they have a Canadian heritage, and in some cases Canadian Citizenship through parents and grandparents, they are not considered immigrants and are not eligible for most immigrant settlement services. Furthermore, despite the “comprehensive system of mutual aid embedded in a well-defined social structure” (Good Gingrich & Lightman, 2006, p. 175), the communities can be deeply divided. While there are examples of some Mennonite groups supporting newcomer LGS families in their settlement, key stakeholders working in the LGS community report that other Mennonite groups in Canada have not always supported LGS families and treat them as inferior (Bennett, 2010).

LGS Mennonites place a great emphasis on living geographically apart from mainstream society. Identifying as citizens of the Kingdom of God rather than of a particular country (Quiring, 2003), the most conservative LGS groups have historically migrated across continents in search of places to live without state intervention. This desire for physical separation has made the transition to Southwestern Ontario difficult for LGS Mennonite newcomers from Mexico. Their lives have become more intermingled with mainstream society than they would like and they are not as self-sufficient as they have traditionally been. Additionally, when moving to Canada from Mexico, LGS Mennonites encounter a society that is highly regulated and monitored. These regulations alter their private lives in ways they are not accustomed to (Hiebert Rempel, 2014). In a typical Mennonite colony for example, parents are the final authority in raising children. But “in Canada, a higher authority tells them how to discipline their children, insists that they send their children to school, and requires that physical needs be addressed according to commonly understood standards within the Canadian context” (Hiebert Rempel, 2014, p. 27).

Since migrating to Canada, economic challenges including struggles with employment, literacy, language, and housing have become prevalent for LGS Mennonites (Bennett, 2010; Draper, 2010; Turner, 2012). The high expense and shortage of land in both Mexico and parts of Canada create an ongoing tension for LGS Mennonite men wishing to continue with the family farm tradition. Their admiration and valuation of physical labour not only appeals to their spirituality, but also their masculinity. In their research on farming masculinities, Brandth and Haugen (2005) refer to the ability to undertake arduous physical work as an important defining feature of masculinity in agricultural production; “when these industries are going through processes of restructuring and decline, one might therefore expect that the meaning of masculinities may be influenced” (Brandth & Haugen, 2005, p. 14). As the options for land ownership are limited in Southwestern Ontario, some LGS Mennonite men choose to work the fields of other farmers (Turner, 2012), but land ownership continues to be ideal. Furthermore, skilled trades such as welding and construction that could be freely practiced without a secondary school diploma in Mexico are regulated in Canada, often requiring postsecondary training and

professional certification. While the values expressed by the LGS Mennonite men are also the values held in a general way among other rural working-class communities in Ontario and elsewhere, their situation is often complicated by limited English and self-marginalization. This makes it difficult for LGS Mennonite men to navigate various social support systems. For example, they are often unaware of landlord/tenant rights and responsibilities, health and safety regulations, and job equality. The belief that life is difficult and one should not advocate for oneself or engage in individualistic behaviour further exacerbates their vulnerability (Turner, 2012).

The Educational Experiences of Low German-speaking Mennonites

Beyond studies of public health and maternal health outcomes (Armstrong & Coleman, 2001; Bennett, 2010; Dabrowska & Bates, 2010; Kulig & Fan, 2013; Kulig, Wall, Hill, & Babcock, 2008) and a recently released book on social exclusion by Good Gingrich (2016), little has been published about the lived experiences of Low German-speaking (LGS) Mennonites in Canada. The few studies documenting the educational experiences of LGS Mennonites reveal a tension between their desired way of life and the learning objectives of the provincial public education systems (Bowen, 2010; Crocker, 2013; Turner, 2012). In Ontario, educational policies relating to attendance, early school leaving, and standardized Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) testing have made it difficult for LGS Mennonite parents to pull their children out of school according to the rhythm of the agricultural seasons or to spend part of the year with extended family in Latin America (Bennett, 2010; Brubacher, 2013; Crocker, 2013; Martens, 1975; Schartner-Hansen, 1990; Sider, 2006). Furthermore, the self-worth of Mennonite men is traditionally cultivated by finding a job at a young age and saving money to buy land and a house, while Mennonite women are taught to look after home and family. If sons and daughters do not feel like finishing high school there is often not much objection from parents (Hiebert Rempel, 2014).

LGS Mennonite parents generally hold the view that Ontario public schools lack the necessary moral compass to educate their children. More specifically, the school curriculum does not reflect their agrarian lifestyle and does not adequately prepare their male children for the physical labour involved in agriculture and the trades (Bennett, 2010; Bowen, 2010; Brubacher, 2013). The LGS Mennonite values and belief system run against normative values found in public education. Similar to the working-class boys studied in the aforementioned literature, LGS Mennonite men generally aspire to careers in the physical labour industries that have historically brought success to their community, and they deem academics inconsequential to this goal (Morris, 2012). In the past, writes Ivinson (2010):

working-class boys who did not do well in secondary school were contained, often in special units, until they reached the legal school leaving age. If they left school with few qualifications, there was little public concern because it was assumed that they would learn skills on the job in apprenticeships. (p. 38)

The LGS Mennonite community, in effect, want their children taught in self-contained special units that do not correspond to current reality, but rather resemble the schools in Willis' (1977) landmark study *Learning to Labour* that created “the workers of the future” while “working class groups were churned out as factory fodder” (p. 38).

Alternative Education Programs

Alternative education programs are typically attended exclusively by Mennonite youth. The programs aim to engage Low German-speaking (LGS) Mennonite students — arguably with an emphasis on male students — by providing an educational experience that does not compromise their community's faith-based effort to remain separate from Canadian society. Programs specifically in the Waterloo Region District School Board (WRDSB), Avon Maitland District School Board (AMDSB), and Upper Grand District School Board (UGDSB) — the sites for this study — tailor classes to the interests of the Mennonite students and are sensitive to the responsibilities that these youth have toward family and community. The alternative education programs are consistent with the Ontario Ministry of Education's liberal multicultural approach to school reform “designed to actualize educational equity for students from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, social class, and linguistic groups” (Banks, 2009), and its inclusive education policies based on the “principles of acceptance and inclusion of all students... whereby students see themselves reflected in their curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment in which diversity is honoured and all individuals are respected” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 9). Yet the programs also contradict these policies by assisting the LGS Mennonite community to remain separate from society rather than encouraging deeper and equal integration within it.

Alternative education programs offer a more hands-on experience to LGS Mennonite men. Students typically come to school two days each week to complete their in-school work in accordance with the prescribed Ontario curriculum, and spend the other days finishing homework and working at co-op placements. Students are able to arrange co-op placements in farming and various other trades such as welding, carpentry, automotive, and machining, with some young men opting for non-traditional placements in manufacturing, healthcare, and administration. In short, through the alternative education programs, LGS Mennonite students are able to obtain their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) in four years, while also receive wages for their labour through co-op placements. Many young men are subsequently hired by their co-op employers after they have completed their schooling. Including a higher ratio of co-op placements to traditional in-school classes enables some alternative programs to substitute co-op classes for those that LGS Mennonite students would often avoid (such as sexual education or French). Having rigid requirements on courses such as those previously mentioned have often been contributing factors to these students dropping out of school, either because they were not deemed useful or were viewed as offensive. Substituting co-op placements has encouraged many male LGS Mennonite students to continue to stay enrolled. The vast majority of programming in these three school boards is done in English because they lack the resources to provide programming in Low German.

It is also important to note that because many LGS Mennonite youth avoid secondary and post-secondary education, there have not been any known traditionally-practicing LGS Mennonites who have graduated from post-secondary programs in education and have returned to work with alternative programs in these local areas.

Table 1

Elements of Publicly-funded Alternative Education Programs in Southwestern Ontario

Program	Location/ School Board	Program Elements
CASE (Community Based Alternative Secondary Education)	Listowel, ON AMDSB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-contained program in Listowel District Secondary School that combines co-op placements and academic learning • Students attend school 2 days each week and co-op 3 days • Provides a variety of courses leading to apprenticeships and other post-secondary programs
Centre Peel Secondary School	RR2 Drayton, ON UGDSB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A variety of gr. 9 & 10 courses are taught in a portable behind Centre Peel Public School • The program runs 2 days each week
ELAWS (Elmira Life and Work School)	Elmira, ON WRDSB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students complete a variety of class options that combine in-school learning with co-op placements • Housed in Elmira District Secondary School • The main focus is to help youth enter the workforce, particularly through apprenticeships • Students attend 2 days each week and participate in co-op the other 3 days
ULEARN	Linwood, ON WRDSB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides both in-school and independent learning at Linwood Public School • The program is meant to be flexible for students that are also working part-time jobs • In-school focus is on gr. 9 & 10 courses, and others can be requested
Riverside Durango	Mornington Central, ON AMDSB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This program is the equivalent to the ULEARN program in WRDSB.

Methodology

This study was based on qualitative data collected over a two-month period through semi-structured interviews with LGS Mennonite men. The interviews were complemented by a brief open-ended questionnaire for teachers and educational support workers who were involved in

alternative education programming. The primary aim of the study was to enable members of the vulnerable LGS Mennonite population to make their voices heard to gain a deeper understanding of how the education system responds to their backgrounds in ways that aid or inhibit their academic achievements and career goals.

Thirteen men of LGS Mennonite backgrounds participated in the study. These men were between the ages of 16 and 33, with the average age of the men being 24 years old. They represented various life stages; some were married with children and others were single. All of the participants, with the exception of one, were either born or descended from parents who were born in the Durango Colony of Northern Mexico.

The population sample relied on in the study was purposeful in nature. The lead author Cameron Brubacher did not target LGS men who originated from a specific region in Mexico; rather he relied on community connections to find research participants. Once recruited into the study, the participants reached out to and recruited other members of the LGS Mennonite community. Both authors acknowledge that this kind of purposeful snowball sampling limits the research findings in that participants end up being from similar backgrounds with similar interests and they tend to recruit people who are willing to talk (Palys, 2008). Excluding women from the study further limited the findings since it left open the question about alternative education and its purpose when it comes to how LGS Mennonite girls are educated in the Mennonite community. Purposive sampling was nonetheless helpful in that Brubacher had a personal connection to each participant, whether through friends, family, or mutual acquaintances. Having these personal connections had a positive impact on the levels of comfort and openness displayed by the men during the interviews.

The research participants all lived within a 30 minute drive from Elmira, Listowel, or Drayton, Ontario. Those who had participated in alternative education programs had done so at the Avon Maitland District School Board, Waterloo Region District School Board, or Upper Grand District School Board. Seven of the 13 LGS Mennonite men interviewed had attended an alternative education program. Of those seven, only three graduated. The motivations for leaving the programs early centered on discomforts with the structure or content, or failing to see the courses and programs as practical or useful. Those who not attend (either by their own choice or their parents) were trying to avoid the secular influence of public schools, and were under the impression that their religious beliefs and convictions would not be honoured even in an alternative education program.

Interviews lasted for 30-60 minutes and took place in spaces chosen by the LGS Mennonite participants. Interview questions broadly focused on their thoughts on secondary education and their experiences in alternative education programs. Questions focused on participants' experiences with public school boards in Ontario (both in elementary schools and secondary alternative education programs), their interactions with their teachers and other students, and views of their families. Interviews with participants who did not attend alternative education programs focused on the reasoning behind the avoidance of public schools and/or alternative education programs, the views in LGS Mennonite communities, and how they plan to educate their own children in the future. Questions were also asked about their hopes, dreams, values, and how they

define success. Although most of these men are able to speak Low German fluently, all of the interviews were conducted in English. Brubacher recruited and communicated with the LGS Mennonite men through text messages. Many also had email addresses and asked to be updated on the project. All were comfortable with their interviews being recorded. Additionally, two teachers who have been involved with alternative education programs provided details and context about the programs through informal conversations with Brubacher. Finally, seven teachers and 11 educational support workers completed a brief open-ended questionnaire where they offered recommendations on how the programs could be strengthened.

Interviews were transcribed and coded by hand for reoccurring words and ideas. Brubacher also wrote notes after each interview reflecting on his time with the participants and the behaviour they displayed while they were together. He used the mind mapping program *MindNode* to group and visualize the initial themes, which eventually merged together into three major themes after going through the transcripts several times. In the next section we summarize the key themes dividing them as follows: (1) attitudes toward employment and education; (2) views on alternative education programs; and (3) obstacles to enrollment in alternative education programs. The section concludes with a series of recommendations on strengthening the alternative education programs made by the participants. We have used participant-selected pseudonyms throughout the section.

Findings

Attitudes toward Employment and Education

To gain a better understanding of the significance of education for the Low German-speaking Mennonite (LGS) population, the 13 LGS Mennonite men who participated in the study were asked about their career aspirations, hopes and dreams. Most of the men spoke of the desire to find employment that would provide them with steady pay and allow them the flexibility to spend more time with their families. According to them, working for others on a farm would restrict their freedom and keep them from farming with their families. Owning rural property with a shop for woodworking or welding or a barn for livestock is highly desired because it would provide the men with the same self-sufficient lifestyles their parents and grandparents had in Mexico, and would limit the negative influences of cities and outsiders on their lives. This desire to own their own land in rural Ontario, however, is hindered by the educational ceiling that many of these men have reached. Not having a high school diploma restricts them from accessing many occupations that would pay well enough to buy a rural property. Prices for farmland in Canada have continually risen since the 1970s, with the sharpest increases occurring over the last ten years. Small, family-owned farms are slowly becoming a notion of the past, as prices per acre of land continue to swell (Holtslander, 2015).

As previously noted, many LGS Mennonite families struggle financially in Ontario. Like other Mennonite groups, young LGS Mennonite men will often give a large percentage of their wages to their parents to help support the often large family. The idea of finding full-time employment after finishing grade 8 is a cultural expectation for men in the Mennonite community. Traditionally, a grade 8 education was all one needed to successfully pursue most full-time jobs.

Those in the LGS Mennonite community take great pride in a good work ethic and entering full-time employment soon after finishing their elementary school education is a way for men to express this solid work ethic (Brandth & Haugen, 2005; Morris, 2012; Walkerdine, 2010; Ward, 2015). In the words of one participant:

Some [parents] would be fine with finishing high school but others want their kids to grow up the way they did. That's a thing they try to do. Keep it as their forefathers did. They grew up going to school till age 13 or 14 and they want to keep it that way. (Cornelius)

The interview data revealed, however, that this traditional attitude toward education might be changing. In the past, many LGS Mennonite men have performed the monotonous low-paying jobs that other Canadians do not wish to do such as picking fruit and vegetables on large farms (Good Gingrich & Preibisch, 2010). There is now a growing desire to get into more highly specialized fields such as the skilled trades. Apprenticeships within the LGS Mennonite community are clearly an important part of their practical knowledge. However, some of the men were aware that further vocational training would require theory learned in a classroom in addition to the practical knowledge earned at a job site. Abe, for example, was adamant that a job should provide more than money, but also satisfaction. To him, a dream job should also be something that requires extra training: "Financial security is part of it, but also being able to have a job where you are happy and satisfied... Not just something that you can start without training, but something that takes time to learn how to do." As attitudes toward secondary school are warming, these same individuals also seem to be starting to consider the possibility of some type of post-secondary education, despite perceptions that post-secondary education does not necessarily result in immediate employment.

Views on Alternative Education Programs

Some of the LGS Mennonite men were in favour of their children and future children going to Ontario public high schools, but most preferred the idea of alternative education programs that could be tailored to the Mennonite population. Again, the men did not differentiate between sons and daughters and we do not know if boys are more likely than girls to reap the social, political, and economic benefits of these programs. Overall, the publicly-funded alternative education programs were viewed positively by the LGS Mennonite participants because: (a) they offer an environment that understands and appreciates the Mennonite faith, traditions and values; (b) they are spaces that shelters LGS Mennonite men from outside distractions and negative influences; (c) they enable LGS Mennonite men to reap the financial benefits of co-op placements to help support their families; and (d) they encourage LGS Mennonite students to complete high school, empowering them with the desire to reach their full potential.

Providing LGS Mennonite men with contained, separate classrooms where they are encouraged to maintain their faith and traditional values while completing their required high school credits is important to the men and their parents. Many parents worry that public education will compromise their children's beliefs and desire to live a more traditional lifestyle, where LGS

Mennonite people marry at a young age, have large families, live simply, and participate in church activities. Like working-class rural communities in Ontario and elsewhere, “blue collar” work is a crucial aspect of the traditional Mennonite lifestyle. There is a worry that going to public high schools could lead young people to leave the church and assimilate into the larger society. Alternative education programs have the ability to engage LGS Mennonite men on their own terms and respect their traditions. One alternative education program teacher described his philosophy of finding ways to support and not change the students as wanting “to not change you, but to support you in who you are and give you some new tools so that you can actually hang on to that even better” (Mr. Dickson).

Mainstream public high schools have the reputation among the LGS Mennonite community of being wild and unruly places where students possess a limited work ethic, lack respect for authority, and bully each other. As Josh, who attended an alternative education program put it, “the way they acted was a lot different than the students in [my program]. They were more rowdy and they didn’t pay attention. They were in their own world and did their own stupid things.” The “rowdy” students did not appear to pose a physical, emotional, or psychological risk to the LGS Mennonite men; the participants merely expressed the worry that such a chaotic environment causes children to compromise their traditional beliefs. As a result, alternative education programs are often housed in a separate building or in classrooms that are physically separated from the other classrooms. This separation was viewed favourably by the LGS Mennonite men, as it allows their young people to avoid the perceived disorder of the mainstream high school as well as negative influences such as drugs and swearing. Being able to fulfil the requirements of the Ontario curriculum in a contained space with other students with similar beliefs and backgrounds is deeply important to LGS Mennonite parents and children. The unintended consequences of channeling young people from less advantaged backgrounds into applied courses, however, is that their chances of getting into postsecondary programs leading to better paying and higher status careers are then limited (Curtis, Livingstone, & Smaller, 1992).

Co-op opportunities also draw young LGS Mennonite men to the alternative education programs because they allow the young men to earn money while completing their high school diploma. Similar to mainstream co-op programs, students get hands-on experience working at various businesses while simultaneously earning school credits. What is unique about the alternative education co-op programs is that students are able to earn more of their high school credits through them. As previously noted, the men typically go to school for one or two days each week, while completing co-op placements the other days. One alternative education teacher did point out however, that the young men tend to pursue placements at Mennonite-owned businesses where they are already employed, and continue to work there after graduating.

During the interviews, the men revealed that many of their peers who go on to pursue their high school diplomas are driven and determined. Upon receiving information about the alternative education programs, they tend to self-initiate their attendance in them. Josh, for example, decided to attend an alternative education program despite his parents’ concerns. After seeing his positive experience, their attitudes have since shifted:

It was my idea... My parents didn't want me to go to school at first so I didn't go for a few months, then I decided that I would do it anyway. I just decided that I would go to school anyway even if they didn't want me to. (Josh)

Jake, like a number of others interviewed, had a similar story. His older brother had to convince his parents to allow him to attend an alternative education program. Once his parents saw that his brother was able to attend without compromising his beliefs and lifestyle, they were open to Jake attending as well. As more LGS Mennonite families are seeing that it is possible for Mennonite children to attend these programs without compromising their beliefs and lifestyles, they are increasingly supporting the attendance of their own children. Once in the programs, the students become more aware of career paths and the significance of a high school diploma.

Obstacles to Enrollment in Alternative Education Programs

The biggest obstacle to attending alternative education programs, according to the LGS Mennonite men, is the ongoing belief that secondary education is not needed. One is told to strive for a good work ethic, and be willing to work hard because physical labour is valued and admired. This is certainly consistent with the values held in working-class rural communities across Canada and elsewhere, but it runs in stark contrast to urban middle class criteria, which awards academic knowledge derived from the school system and looks down upon physical labour (Parker, 1996). When Josh originally tried to convince his parents to let him go to an alternative education program, they did not see why he would need additional schooling if he would get a job right away like his older siblings, father, and other relatives:

Well they just thought that a lot of people don't go so why would I have to. They said if I don't need [a high school diploma] then why do I want it? I can just keep working and then I don't need school so there's no point in doing it. (Josh)

For others, the stigma surrounding high school is enough to deter them. These extra "unnecessary" years are thought to be a poor use of time. Those who spent extra time in school were considered lazy, putting off getting a job that would ultimately help support their parents and siblings. Cornelius commented that in his friend group they poked fun at those who wanted to spend extra years in school. The idea of completing both secondary and post-secondary education is thought to change the cultural fibers of the LGS Mennonite community, which results in a great deal of apprehension. Furthermore, Mennonite-owned shops and services factor heavily into the men's decision to leave school early. In what resembles Breton's (1964) "institutional completeness" of ethnic enclaves, the businesses hire LGS Mennonite men, and do not require a high school diploma. The dilemma is whether there is a critical mass of these businesses to hire sufficient numbers of young LSG Mennonite men while paying them a living wage.

The Ontario curriculum also causes apprehension. The 13 LGS Mennonite men, as well as the teachers and educational support workers who participated in the study, agreed that LGS Mennonite parents are still concerned about harmful curriculum content. Content that focuses on

human sexuality and development, as well as the theory of evolution, are particularly concerning to them. This concern seems to result, at least partly, from poor communication, since teachers from various alternative education programs claimed that there has not been a formal agenda to bring up matters of sexuality, and evolution is taught in a “softer” way that is mindful and respectful to LGS Mennonite beliefs. Although there is undoubtedly content that does not entirely line up with LGS Mennonite beliefs, teachers in alternative education programs are attempting to teach it in appropriate and sensitive ways. Beyond sensitive content, some of the LGS men that had attended alternative programs further expressed that they did not believe that the material they learned was practical and relevant to their lives, which caused them to lose interest in the programs altogether. This is precisely one of the most documented reasons why working-class boys typically underachieve in schools, and this is not unique to LGS Mennonite men.

Lastly, a surprising theme that was brought up by some of the more traditional LGS Mennonite men was the concern of mixing too much with other Mennonite groups. LGS Mennonites do have a similar foundation and background to other Mennonite groups going back to their origins in Europe. However, their beliefs and practices differ in comparison to other Mennonite groups. Their history of immigrating to Mexico and various South American countries is also different from other groups of Mennonites in the Elmira, Listowel, and Drayton areas. The men reported that mixing with other Mennonite groups would result in the loss of their own unique and distinct traditions. Over the years, Mennonite churches and sects have divided because of differences of opinion and beliefs in theology and practice. Those that have continued in specific traditions typically do so because of their strong beliefs in that lifestyle, such as wearing certain clothing or driving a horse and buggy. While there were friendly interactions between Mennonite groups in the classrooms of the alternative programs, students still tended to stay with their “own” groups during breaks. Multiple participants who went to various programs mentioned how they preferred to stick with other LGS Mennonite students when they had the opportunity at school. This desire to be with people from their own faith tradition has sometimes led to feelings of isolation when few or no other LGS Mennonite students were present. Although LGS Mennonites are not against interacting and going to school with other Mennonites, there is a preference and desire to “mind their own,” as Peter put it.

Recommendations on Increasing Enrollment

Low German-speaking Culture: While the alternative programs are a step in the right direction, the Low German-speaking (LGS) Mennonite men recommended the programs place a greater emphasis on their specific culture. As noted, there is a clear separation between LGS and other groups of Mennonites, even though they can work together amicably. Several of the young men who participated in this study did not like being lumped in with other Mennonite groups, and appreciated when the distinction was acknowledged. Furthermore, many LGS Mennonite students lack knowledge about their own cultural background. Promoting LGS culture through LGS language, literature, and history would make these students feel more valued at school. A number of LGS participants suggested that hiring more teachers of Mennonite and specifically LGS

Mennonite background would help make students and their parents more comfortable in participating in alternative education programs.

Gender: While alternative education programs continue to attract more male students than female, female students are beginning to enroll in greater numbers. These young women are also increasingly completing co-op placements in non-traditional sectors such as nursing. Some alternative education programs are known to be more academic than others. These programs are currently attempting to become more comprehensive to attract more students. Nevertheless, the absence of discussion in the interview data about LGS Mennonite women's experiences in the alternative education programs suggests that the programs need to make a far greater effort to attract female students and avoid unintentionally constructing masculine identity and making gender inequality even more pronounced within LGS Mennonite communities.

Employment Preparation: The men recommended that beyond co-op opportunities, the alternative programs should offer a greater number of classes that focus on entrepreneurship because small business ownership is regarded as a way to hold onto the LGS traditional lifestyle where self-sufficiency is so valued. A greater focus on the skilled trades would further help make students see the benefits of obtaining their high school diploma. Finally, the teachers and educational support workers commented that reducing or eliminating the 40 hour community service requirement would also be beneficial. As Sarah, an alternative education program teacher, noted:

When it comes to doing the 40 hours of community service that is a big deal to them. It seems like a waste of time if they can't get paid. We've had students ready to graduate but could not were unable to complete the 40 hours of volunteering. (Sarah)

Engage Parents: Many alternative education programs find it difficult to engage LGS Mennonite parents, particularly LGS fathers. As previously noted, some LGS Mennonite youth take their own initiative. However, parents still maintain a great deal of influence over their child's decision to enroll in an alternative education program. LGS fathers tend to have less interaction with non-Mennonites than mothers who appear to be more interested in their children taking part in school programs. LGS Mennonite fathers seem to prefer that their wives interact with their children's schools. It will be fascinating to see how traditional gender roles play out in the LGS Mennonite community in the future, and how these role changes will affect the traditional way of life. If LGS women continue to take leadership positions within the family to interact with those outside of their close LGS communities, perhaps gender inequalities will also be addressed.

Program Promotion: Better communication is needed to promote alternative education programs. Promoting the programs earlier in elementary school rather than in grade 7 or 8 would help students and parents see the benefits earlier and become accustomed to the idea of attending high school. Many people are unfamiliar with the programs. Although information can circulate through word of mouth, it has not been an effective method. The fact that the study participants who had attended programs were mainly those who had initiated their own attendance shows that LGS Mennonite parents are not being effectively informed of the programs. Outside of the

Mennonite community, it was difficult for us as researchers to find material containing information about the alternative education programs investigated. Websites need to be established, up to date, and easily accessible for parents to search for information online.

Training and Information Sharing: Participants requested a greater amount of cultural training be available to both seasoned and new teachers. Currently, training is not consistent and seemed to range from training sessions developed by specific schools, to no training at all. Training from an outside organization such as Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), who has more resources and knowledge available, was sought after by some of the participants. It was suggested by one teacher that attendance at the Low German Networking Conference hosted by MCC in Aylmer, Ontario should be mandatory for teachers who are new to alternative education programs. There was also a desire for more informational literature on the LGS population to help teachers develop a better understanding of their students. Teachers expressed particular interest in knowing more about prevailing Mennonite attitudes surrounding education. While some literature is available about LGS Mennonites from various county health units, more is needed.

Collaboration: Finally, teachers and education support workers requested more collaboration among those schools boards offering alternative education programs. One teacher remarked that there has been some collaboration in the past with respect to recreational activities; however, this has come to a standstill. Collaboration to share educational resources between programs, such as lists of relevant literature that is deemed culturally appropriate and relevant, or teaching methods, tips, and strategies, would be greatly appreciated. One obstacle to such collaboration is the underlying fact that school boards are ultimately in competition with each other for the same funding. In the past, when alternative education programs were scarce, students travelled to other school boards to get the programming that they needed. Now that there are programs — and sometimes multiple programs — operating in school boards that are in close proximity, there is some underlying competition to retain students and attract new ones to bolster numbers. While school boards do need to be continually pushing the envelope to ensure that their programs are of the same quality as those in other boards, this competition should not involve the withholding of resources from each other. To best serve the LGS Mennonite population, these rural school boards need to work collaboratively to set their students up for success.

Discussion and Conclusion

The accommodation of cultures and religions is not often equated with rural schools. This article has highlighted the incredible diversity that exists in rural Ontario, and that is often overlooked by school boards. Our research has demonstrated the need for Low German-speaking (LGS) Mennonite men to be accommodated in rural schools so that they do not become disengaged, leave school early, and ultimately put themselves and their communities in a vulnerable economic position. The disengagement of young LGS Mennonite men can be largely traced to a few known causes, including a prescribed gender role that involves pressure to get a full-time job, support large families, and ultimately purchase land to continue an agrarian lifestyle. These community or family-level factors are largely beyond the control of alternative education programs.

Nevertheless, the programs can have more control over disengagement caused by the material that is taught in the classroom, the inability of students who have fallen behind to catch up, the overall dissatisfaction with the school environment, and the effort to combine schooling with paid employment through co-op placements.

The purpose of school in Canada and elsewhere is to socialize young people to the norms, values, and cultural patterns of the dominant society while simultaneously preparing them for the workforce (Nunes, 2017). In fulfilling their purpose, schools promote particular linguistic structures, authority patterns, and types of curricula that may alienate certain groups. LGS Mennonites who have settled in Ontario may not possess the dominant cultural capital that is reproduced and reinforced by the provincial education system. However, alternative education programs are attempting to harness their strong sense of organic community that incorporates theology, culture, and lifestyle so that they can be successful in school (Loewen Reimer, 2008). Nevertheless, economic survival will inevitably draw these young men closer to a society for which they may not be prepared. In this respect, comparisons can be made to the European-based literature on educating working-class boys who, especially in the old coal and steel producing areas of the region, “live at a pivotal point betwixt the industrial past and emergent economies of global capitalism” (Ivinson, 2010, p. 39). Economists have argued that schools should teach skills required for economic competitiveness, and in the face of globalized markets and possible economic decline, this argument has acquired renewed vigor (Leitch Review of Skills, 2006). By creating self-contained separate classrooms for these young men, we as researchers cannot help but wonder if these programs are equipping them with the critical thinking needed to adapt to societal change, or the ability to respect the plurality of worldviews, belief systems, values, and practices that make up Canadian society (Brathwaite & James, 1996; Seljak, 2009). For example, does a “soft” or “sensitized” version of evolution give LGS Mennonite students the opportunity to understand fully the theory (Jacquet & D’Amico, 2016)? Likewise, does eliminating the mandatory forty hours of community service squander a good opportunity for the students to engage with society?

Our study was limited by a small population sample size and the participation of LGS Mennonite men only. As noted, the alternative education programs’ focus on hands-on training through co-op placements in largely vocational fields may not appeal to LGS Mennonite women, who also leave school early to undertake unpaid work in the home. These criticisms notwithstanding, this research does emphasize the important need of LGS Mennonite students to receive strong messages from educators that their language, culture, and religious beliefs are valued (Shields, 2003), even if that means separating the youth from Canadian society rather than integrating them on equal terms to minimize their marginalization.

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