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When Everything Old is New Again: Amish Career and Technical Education

Abstract: In this qualitative study, the authors briefly describe the Amish formal education system, discuss career and technology education in Amish communities and examine the possible transfer of the model to public schools. Forty-six Amish schoolteachers, school board members and successful businessmen were interviewed. Findings include religion, family and work ethic are the foundations of Amish culture. Schools need to continue to make the learning practical for real life applications. Employers look for the “right” attitude and ability to learn. Workers must be able to transfer knowledge among differing contexts. An extra year of schooling might be beneficial for a variety of career and technical training programs since they do not offer career and technical education in the schools. In conclusion, apprenticeship programs in the public schools and non-Amish businesses would be well served to emulate the training approach found in Amish business communities.

1. Introduction

The demand for vocationally trained skill labor continues to evolve in terms of requisite skill sets worldwide (Eichhorst, Rodriguez-Planas, Schmidl & Zimmermann, 2015, pp. 314-337). With the aging of the baby boomer population in the U.S., the need to train and develop workers in the trades continues to expand. “Educational settings must match individual’s gifts all of the time” (Schrag, 2008, pp 287). There has been a mostly static curriculum in the Amish school districts throughout the U.S. for the last 30 years. Formal education ends at age 14 for Amish students. This relatively brief academic education must provide them the essential tools to be successful

during their work as entrepreneurs or employees in manufacturing, service and agricultural careers.

A study of the Amish educational system would be beneficial in generating questions and critical reflections within the context of foundations and assumed pedagogy of the American educational system. Perhaps the most widely known and misunderstood religious order are the Amish. While many may *know of* the Amish, they *know not* the Amish. This is especially true regarding Amish education in terms of the overall goals of educating in the Amish communities and the specific structures and pedagogy employed. While there have been attempts at explaining organization among Amish schools (Dewalt, 2006; Fisher & Stahl, 1997), as well as debating the effectiveness of these schools (Fischel, 2012) and extolling aspects of Amish educational practices (Junkins, 2014), there is scant research about career and technical education (formerly called vocational education) in the Amish educational system. The purpose of this paper is to examine the structure and effectiveness of career and technical education within the Amish community, and how it might transfer to public education.

The authors have spent years cultivating relationships with members of Amish communities throughout the United States and have conducted interviews and observed in both schools and Amish-owned businesses in numerous Amish communities in three states. This was a qualitative study with 46 participants conducted over a 3-year period in several large Amish communities in the upper Midwest of the United States. Multiple interviews were held with the same individuals during this study. Findings include the importance that religion, family, work ethic, education, community and culture play in ensuring a successful citizen within the Amish communities. In this paper we will 1) briefly describe Amish formal education, 2) discuss career and technology education in Amish communities and 3) examine the possible transfer of the model to public schools.

2. Education in the Amish Community

As Knotts and Keesey (2016) note, no two communities are exactly the same. There will be similarities in structure and practice, but each community is an individual. This is especially true in regards to education. Due to the landmark United States Supreme Court ruling in *Wisconsin v. Yoder* in 1972, Amish communities may end the formal education of their children after the eighth grade. Typically, children attend a one or two-room schoolhouse and are seated in rows according to their grade; first grade through eighth in one room, or (if there are enough children) grades one through four in one room and grades five through eight in another. The curriculum consists of reading, writing, arithmetic, history, geography, and health. The teachers working with each grade individually, while the other grades attempt

independent work. Curriculum in the seventh and eighth grades typically integrate scenarios and problems involving real-life applications that will be faced in the world when school is completed. Often, older children help with instruction for the younger grades. Lunch and recess are looked forward to with anticipation and, since the schools are without electricity, there is virtually no technology available or used. Teachers have no formal pedagogical training but attend regional staff development regularly and benefit from local systems of support and training. Each school has a school board made up of three to five local Amish men whose responsibilities are to provide resources for the school, hire teachers, collect school taxes, and consult with parents and teachers.

Though the Amish formal education ends after the eighth grade, the rigor and relevance that constitutes the curriculum enables Amish students to be employed in good stead outside the Amish community. Once eighth grade is completed, Amish children begin to prepare for careers through apprenticeships in a chosen field or one at which they have exhibited a particular aptitude. Young men typically enter agrarian, manufacturing, or crafting-medium endeavors while young ladies enter retail or service businesses before starting families. Learning continues after formal education stops. It simply takes the form of hands on experience and continued self-directed learning via reading.

Although each school is unique, there is one constant in Amish education. Foremost, the “Amish maintain educational distinctiveness through administrative and curricular choices that are compatible with their life-styles and values” (McConnell & Hurst, 2006, p. 238). The set of beliefs that form the core of the Amish communities are evident in the schools. The basic premise of education mirrors that of the community. The school, just as the community, exists for a greater good and service to others is an important part of that premise. Preparing children for participation in their community has always been the overarching goal of Amish education.

Amish Education for Students with Special Needs

The Amish address the education of their special needs students differently than is done in mainstream American schools. The way that American schools attend to special education can be traced back to Public Law 94-142, or the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (as it was called at the time). Prior to the enactment of this Federal law, the education of special needs students was an afterthought, and after an intense examination the United States Congress saw ten wrongs:

- Outright exclusion of special needs children (10 million in number)
- Unique needs were not met
- Excluded from appropriate programs
- Evaluations were wrong and inadequate
- No goals or measure of progress

- Segregation from non-special needs students
- No related services
- Parents not involved
- No access to children's records
- No impartial grievance forum

Therefore, certain mandates were established for educating special needs children. There is free public education for all special needs students between ages 3 and 21, and students are placed in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). Each identified student has an Individualized Education Program (IEP) in which the goals for the students are determined as well as a description of the services they are to receive, the evaluation criteria, and the extent of their participation in the regular education program. Setting the student's IEP are the parents, the special education teacher, a regular education teacher, a school administrator, someone to interpret and explain the diagnostic and educational data, and other parties invited by the parents or the school. The IEP is reviewed annually. Senator Robert Stafford called Public Law 94-142 an act of love rather than a law. Later, further Federal laws concerning working with special needs individuals came in the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) of 1990 and its revision in 1997. Clearly, the education of special needs students in American public schools is articulated and specific.

The Amish approach the education of their students with special needs differently than is done in public schools and have no mandates or specifics. They approach it from a community perspective; that is, the community takes care of all of its members. They have addressed, from the start, an issue mainstream America has not solved. Participant 1 shared how the Amish fully confronted the issue of who takes care of a special needs individual who is an only child (or adult) whose parents have passed away. If the child has no living relatives, a member of the church (typical size is 12-15 families) will legally adopt the child/adult and bring them into their homes to be cared for as if they were a child of that family!

3. Methodology

The participants

This qualitative study, conducted over a 3-year period in major Amish communities in Indiana, Ohio and Pennsylvania, sought to determine if the vocational education programs in Amish communities could and/or should be replicated in the public school systems across the U.S. A series of in-depth, multiple interviews with 46 Amish schoolteachers, school board members and successful businessmen (ages 32 to 70 plus years) examined how a formal school education that ended for students when they reached fourteen years old could prepare them for a life in the 21st century. (See Appendix for interview questions)

Farming is no longer the primary business of most people in the Amish communities. Edgier (2005) reported that “A more recent major problem is to determine a vocation other than farming which traditionally has been a main stay among the Old Order Amish” (p. 422), and McConnell and Hurst (2006) emphasized the need for economic alternatives for the Amish. In fact, today, only “10% of the Amish farm full time” (participants 1, 4, 5, 6, and 9). This is primarily due to demand for farmland in Amish communities and its resultant high price. Many Amish farm part time and work full time off the farm. Construction, light manufacturing and the service industries (e.g. retirement communities and retail shops) are often the primary sources of income for the community members.

Today’s Amish communities conduct a significant amount of business with people outside their immediate community (participants 1, 4, 5, 6, 17, 34, and 41). There is simply not a large enough population in any one community to be self-sustainable without trading outside their society. In a society where computers drive many of the procedures and processes in manufacturing, how do the Amish compete so successfully with such limited formal education? Are there aspects of their educational system we can/should incorporate into the public school systems in the U.S.?

Data collection

This qualitative study was conducted with personal interviews using a combination of purposively sampling strategies –reputational case, maximum variation sampling and concept/theory-based participants. Using prolonged fieldwork, interviews were conducted in schools, businesses and homes of the participants.

Validity was enhanced by prolonged and persistent fieldwork by two researchers as well by member checking and participant review of the handwritten interview notes. Reflexivity was accomplished through the maintenance of field logs by the researchers.

4. Analysis and Findings

Several findings emerged from this study.

- Religion, family and work ethic are the foundation of the Amish culture.
- Because there are fewer farmers each year in Amish communities, there is growing concern over the possible loss of work ethic because the young people have fewer responsibilities at home.
- Teachers and businessmen alike confirmed a continuing need for innovation and application in all areas of their lives that does not contradict the basic tenets of the community. This is necessary to keep them competitive in the markets they depend on outside of their communities.

- Workers must be able to transfer knowledge among differing contexts.
- Employers look for the “right” attitude and ability to learn.
- The work ethic that is learned in the home and school is vital.
- Schools need to continue to make the learning practical for real life applications.
- An extra year of schooling might be beneficial for a variety of vocational training since they do not offer vocational training in the schools. Some of the participants suggested referring to it as a transition year. For example—students are eagerly sought after who can work in masonry, weld, operate a keyboard, and or possess basic accounting skills.
- Some Amish businesses are allowed by their bishops to use computers for their work with specific software for that endeavor. Those businesses will have onsite generators rather than being connected to a public power grid.
- After formal education, the boys become an apprentice in an occupation of their choosing or one in which they have shown an aptitude.
- Girls typically work in retail shops and service businesses such as restaurants and nursing homes.
- Sometimes the apprenticeships do not work out and the boys/girls need to find other employment.
- The rules of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) are carefully adhered to by all of the participants in this study.

5. Conclusions

The cornerstones of religion, family and work ethic support the foundation of the Amish communities and education helps to build on that foundation. The education Amish children receive equips them to be successful citizens not only in their communities, but outside the community as well. Participants in the study shared instances of Amish children thriving in businesses and work outside of their community, such as computer programming and graphic art. Where did they learn the needed skills? From their foundational education and subsequent on-the-job training. Life in an Amish community does not negate or discourage work-related innovation and creativity.

Today’s Amish communities conduct a significant amount of business with people not only outside their immediate community, but outside their state and even the nation. Many of the Amish business owners with whom we spoke have regular business dealings on an international level. A question asked earlier was how do the Amish compete so successfully with such limited formal education? The answer is relatively simple: their education, while concise, is thorough. Each community is dedicated to preparing their children to take their place in the community, and their

education ensures this. Upon completion of school, their education is not finished. Certainly, an apprentice system contributes to their on-going education, but just as significant, the Amish stress the importance of self-directed learning and within their community. This is accomplished through reading. Outstanding libraries exist within Amish communities with volumes ranging in topics from classic literature to mechanical engineering. Many Amish are as adept in discussing 18th century French philosophers as they are discussing dairy farming.

Over the years the Amish have adapted their lives as determined by advances in technology. While preferring not to use electricity, Amish businesses employ natural gas lighting and generators. While not driving motor vehicles themselves, many communities allow and even encourage hiring others outside the community to transport not only them but their manufactured and agrarian products as well. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that many of the participants in this study suggested adaptations in schools as well. Because computer competence is becoming essential to most workplaces in one form or another, perhaps keyboarding might be taught; not on actual computers but simply the keyboard or keyboard model. Many Amish business use computers loaded with appropriate software (no music or games) and a basic knowledge of keyboarding would facilitate the apprenticeship process. Others suggested a possible transition year, such as a ninth grade, to begin teaching vocation specific skills such as welding, masonry, and accounting. This, too, might benefit both the employee and employer.

Time and again, participants who owned or supervised businesses stressed the importance of a potential employee and apprentice's attitude. They look to hire from within the community and value the individual's willingness to work and ability to transfer knowledge and skills in one context to another. They appreciate that since these traits and abilities are important in the community as a whole, they are emphasized in schools. It should be noted that the participants look for these same attitudes when they hire individuals from outside the community, which is done regularly. Some participants did express that, with a decline in the number of Amish engaged in farming, they were concerned that the work ethic of the young may begin to wane in the absence of after-school farm-related chores. Youth in the Amish community are like youth outside of the community who are not certain of which career trajectory they should take. There do occur instances when an individual must try their hand at a few endeavors before they find their occupational calling.

In short, the Amish system of career and technical education works very well – for the Amish. It has helped maintain a quality life style for its members. Transferring their formal educational philosophy and practice to the public school system could prove to be problematic. The secular society of the United States would not allow it. There are, however, pieces of their career and technical education programs that warrant consideration. In particular, we could be well served to seek ways to foster the increased use and support of apprentices. For example, apprentices were paid

a living wage at all of the businesses where the interviews were conducted. They could see first-hand monetary rewards for doing well and excelling as well as possible monetary deterrents. This proved to be a motivator. Public schools often provide various career and technical education programs at the high school level and many provide a multitude of hands-on experiences. Rarely, though, are the experiences of the students totally immersed as a worker, that is, be successful or don't get paid or see advancement. Those programs that do offer a form of apprenticeship certainly see the benefits in terms of motivation and conscientiousness. The Amish practice of apprenticeship is built on what was received in formal education through eighth grade and supplemented with hands on training and self-directed learning. Education did not stop at the completion of eighth grade; it simply took a different route.

Testifying before a subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Appropriations, Herman Bontrager, a member of the Amish community, put it very succinctly: Amish vocational training is primarily accomplished through apprenticeships in the context of their extended families. They do not utilize high schools or vocational schools, technical schools, or colleges for training. Apprenticeships adequately meet the training needs of Amish young people and help to keep them integrated in the Amish community during those crucial adolescent years. This system keeps the children off the streets, out of prisons, and makes them contributors to the welfare of the community at a very early age. It is important to the Amish to train children to do the best they can in their work and do it safely. (United States Congress, 2001, p. 25).

These words are applicable for those outside the community as well. Certainly, we want to meet the training needs of all of our students and help make them contributors in the community at-large. Most importantly, we want to acknowledge and meet the demand for vocationally trained skilled labor both locally and globally. In their societies, adequate training for Amish doesn't necessitate secondary or post-secondary education. Many outside of their communities agree that training for much of the workforce may not require a two or four-year college degree, but rather, proper career and technical training. Perhaps if we look at it in just the right light, what is old can influence what is new, and a community can provide a blueprint to impact the world.

6. Appendix

Questions for the participants

1. How many years of formal education do the students in your community receive?
2. Are they in parochial or public schools?
3. What are the instructors' credentials?
4. What subjects are taught in your school?

5. What is the amount of time and type of practical hands-on experience in the classroom for vocational education?
6. Is there vocational education in the school?
7. Do you use the apprenticeship system in the workplace?
8. How long is it?
9. What is the remuneration structure for apprentices?
10. Do they provide their own tools?
11. How many hours per day do they work?
12. Do they receive insurance and benefits?
13. In general, are they satisfied?
14. In general, as the employer, are you satisfied?
15. Have you ever hired a trainee who did not work out?
16. What were they missing?
17. Do you use teams for choosing a new hire?
18. Do you use teams in the workplace?
19. What are the guidelines used in forming a team?
20. What would you like to see changed in your school system to better prepare your apprentices for the workplace?

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