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Low German Mennonite Experiences in Alternative Education Programs in Southwestern Ontario

Cameron Brubacher

Wilfrid Laurier University, brub9130@mylaurier.ca

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Low German Mennonite Experiences in Alternative Education Programs in
Southwestern Ontario

By
Cameron Brubacher

Major Research Project
Completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Social Justice and
Community Engagement Master of Arts program at Wilfrid Laurier University

Brantford, Ontario

Supervisor: Dr. Stacey Wilson-Forsberg

Second Reader: Dr. Steve Sider

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Abstract

Low German Speaking (LGS) Mennonites have had a tumultuous relationship with Canadian educational institutions in the past, resulting in many from the community migrating to Mexico in the 1920s. Since the 1950s, LGS Mennonites from Mexico and South America have been migrating back to Canada, with over 40,000 making their homes in Ontario. Many in Ontario, however, still have misgivings about public education. With such a large presence in Ontario, Ontario schools need to make sure that they are inclusive places for this minority group. This MRP utilizes open-ended interviews to hear the experiences and views of Low German Speaking (LGS) Mennonite men in alternative education programs in Ontario. This MRP uncovers a better understanding of LGS Mennonite views, both positive and negative, about alternative education programs, as well as their views on mainstream education, and their desire for private schools. It also sheds light on the needs of teachers in these alternative programs, and provides recommendations for the programs. By having a better understanding of LGS Mennonite views on alternative education programs and education in general, schools can become places that LGS students and their families regard as inclusive, safe, and reflective of their unique experiences and identity.

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Introduction

My Story and Interest in This Project

This project combines two major areas of interest in my life: education and the Mennonite faith and lifestyle. My experiences both growing up and working in education in the Mennonite community alongside Low German Speaking (herein referred to as LGS) Mennonites, have given me a unique glimpse into the communities of LGS Mennonites. Also, because I come from a conservative Mennonite background, I understand the desire of the 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, I have also seen a number of students from this population struggle academically.

Being raised in the Mennonite community gave me a rich upbringing and has had a great impact on my own values and faith. I have felt a passion for education and have had the desire to be a teacher since grade five. As a first-generation student, the thought of obtaining two post-secondary degrees to fulfill my dream seemed daunting. Fortunately, both of my parents were extremely supportive of my goals and aspirations, and encouraged me every step of the way. Education has always played a large role in my life. Growing up, my parents did not have the same opportunities to earn secondary (also known as high school) and post-secondary school diplomas or degrees. As a young man in a Markham Mennonite church, my father followed the traditional educational path and left school at age 14 to work full-time as a farmhand. Although he was able to complete a handful of distance education high-school level courses later in life, he always wished that he would have had the chance to go to high school. My mother was from a less conservative Mennonite home where both she and her siblings were encouraged to do something that their parents had not — attend and graduate high school. Although she loved and

excelled at her high school studies, she was not encouraged to pursue post-secondary education. She, too, has expressed many times the regret at not pursuing those dreams.

The support from my parents to pursue post-secondary studies has been incredible. As a first-generation student, I have seen the personal positive effects and promise that education brings to one's life. Education, both secondary and post-secondary, has acquainted me with many new topics and ideas, has taught me to think critically, and ultimately has opened the doors to a life where I can pursue my passions.

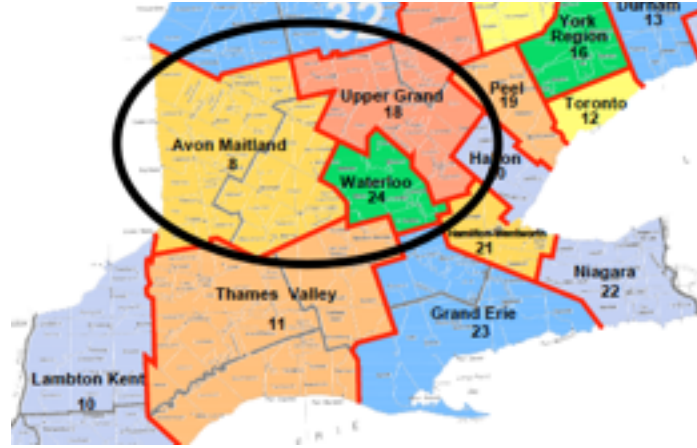
Seeing the impact that secondary and post-secondary education has had on my own life, I am very supportive of the publicly-funded alternative secondary school programs that are available to students in Ontario, and I am particularly interested in those that support Mennonite students. Four that are local to the Waterloo Region are the Elmira Life and Work School (ELAWS) program at Elmira District Secondary School (EDSS) in Elmira, Ontario, the Community-based Alternative Secondary Education (CASE) program at Listowel District Secondary School (LDSS) in Listowel, Ontario, the ULearn program at Linwood Public School in Linwood, Ontario, and the Centre Peel Secondary School program located close to Drayton, Ontario (Mennonite Central Committee, 2016). Programs such as these have attempted to create safe spaces for Mennonite students, where they can pursue a secondary school diploma, while maintaining their beliefs and cultural identity. These programs have opened up an avenue for many conservative Mennonite students who would ordinarily not feel comfortable attending a secondary school institution (Mennonite Central Committee, 2014; Turner, 2012). In my experience, the opportunity to attend a secondary or post-secondary institution is a crucial element in helping Mennonites improve and strengthen their present and future quality of life. With such benefits to be had, such programs must continue to evolve so that they are safe spaces

for all Mennonite students, where students can attend while keeping their culture and beliefs intact.

While preparing students for the workforce should not be the only goal of an educational system, it is a necessity in the current neoliberal era, particularly for LGS Mennonites who face economic obstacles without secondary school diplomas. In a world where a secondary school diploma is often the minimal requirement employers expect from prospective employees, those without a diploma are easily left in a vulnerable economic position. There are far reaching effects when one does not earn enough money to live a physically and emotionally healthy lifestyle. Despite this, according to Bennett (2010), Crocker (2013) and Turner (2012), even though alternative secondary school programs have been created with conservative Mennonites in mind, many LGS Mennonite students continue to leave school at the age of 13 or 14 rather than joining these programs. This has contributed to a cycle of poverty that many in this community face. A greater understanding is needed in order to improve these alternative programs, so that they can be culturally safe and LGS Mennonites are not forced into economically vulnerable positions because of their religious and cultural beliefs. This project has emerged from the belief that education can have a remarkably positive impact on one's quality of life, as well as the desire to continue to improve the educational experiences of those in LGS Mennonite communities so that more can reap the rewards that education can offer.

Purpose of MRP

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, have continued to see growing numbers of LGS Mennonites



Ontario Secondary School Teaching Federation, 2014.

enroll and receive their secondary school diplomas. However, many LGS Mennonites continue to leave school at age 13 or 14, or after they have graduated grade 8 (Bennett, 2010; Crocker, 2013). This major research project (MRP) will therefore uncover some of the factors that are causing LGS Mennonites to avoid or feel uncomfortable in these alternative education programs.

Based on qualitative data collected through interviews and open-ended surveys with 13 young Mennonite men as well as teachers and social service workers, this research is exploratory in that it seeks to contribute to a better understanding of both the lived-experiences of LGS students and any barriers that they face in alternative education programs in Southwestern Ontario. Previous research has shown that there is still work to be done in terms of removing barriers. For example, Turner (2012), in her study, quotes Marie, an Ontario teacher in an alternative education program, saying, “they are, not embracing it – they’re tolerating it. They’re letting their child come but it’s not like they’re 100 percent supportive” (p. 53). The lack of a secondary school diploma has put many LGS Mennonites at an economic disadvantage. Education is a key aspect for one to adapt to an ever-changing world and rise out of poverty. As

Catarina Schmidt, another Ontario teacher and LGS Mennonite said, “without an education, their cycle of poverty will never end” (Towell, 1999).

Using semi-structured interviews and a brief open-ended survey, this MRP sought to understand the experiences and perspectives of the participating LGS men and their families regarding alternative education programs. Using a social justice lens, and supported by a body of theoretical and empirical literature from Critical Education and Acculturation theory, this MRP begins with a historical context of LGS Mennonites and education. It then presents an overview of how the research was conducted and why methodological decisions were made. Following a detailed presentation of my findings the MRP concludes that there need to be changes in the structure of alternative programs to engage and re-engage LGS students, increased and clearer promotion to the LGS community, a greater emphasis on LGS culture and history, as well as resources and projects that will enable LGS students to complete their schooling through an LGS cultural lens, and become producers of knowledge. It was also found that more teachers with Mennonite background, specifically LGS Mennonite background, need to be recruited, and that there needs to be greater support for teachers through training and collaboration.

Historical Context

The Mennonite movement was born out of the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s. While Mennonites, also known as Anabaptists, vary significantly in their specific beliefs and practices, there are common threads that unite them, such as the belief in adult baptism, pacifism, commitment to simple lifestyles, and separation from mainstream society (Dyck, 1993; Johnson-Weiner, 2007; Loewen Reimer, 2008; Redekop, 1989). According to Bender, Steiner, and Thiessen (2016), Mennonites are found throughout the world and number over 2 million

individuals. They are made up of members from a diverse set of cultures that speak many languages.

Low German Speaking Mennonites (LGS) from Mexico and South America are one sect in the greater Mennonite movement. There is a great amount of variation even within LGS communities, as Draper (2010) and Sneath (2004) note, within the LGS Mennonites, there are a number of distinct groups including the Reinlander, Chortitzer, Sommerfelder, Kleine Gemeinde, the Bergthaler, and Old Colony Mennonites, all of whom vary in their degrees of conservativeness. However, their language of Low German, also known as Plautdietsch, is one of the main uniting factors of the groups. LGS people live in many countries around the world, including Canada, and have been known by many names in Canada including the Kanadier, Colony Mennonites, Low-German Latin Americans and Mexican Mennonites. However, Kulig & Fan (2013) recommend that the most appropriate name to refer to these groups as is Low German Speaking Mennonites, which also serves as way to unite and refer to the various LGS sects despite their differences. LGS Mennonites can trace their heritage to Russia, and even farther back to Poland and Netherlands. This MRP will specifically look at LGS Mennonites whose heritage is in Mexico and South America, but who have subsequently migrated to the Elmira, Listowel, and Drayton areas of Ontario, Canada.

Since there is such great variation within the LGS Mennonites, it is impossible to pinpoint one set of traditional beliefs that they have all adhered to; however, the most conservative in Mexico and South America are known to forgo electricity and use horse and buggies instead of automobiles (Kulig & Fan, 2013). LGS Mennonites who have moved from Mexico back to Canada still maintain a fairly traditional way of life, but tend to be more liberal in many ways than their counterparts who still live in Mexico. More traditional LGS people in

Ontario typically live a life of simplicity, modesty, and humility. Many LGS women wear handmade dresses, while men generally wear plain shirts and jeans (Draper, 2010). Traditional LGS Mennonites have a more literal interpretation of the Bible, and, like other Mennonites, base their lives on the Bible and the teachings of Jesus. LGS Mennonites are typically less “evangelical” than other Mennonite groups, and do not proselytize to the same degree, if at all (Draper, 2010; Quiring, 2003). Traditional views often regard higher education as something to be avoided, particularly one that does not maintain their language.

Another way that LGS Mennonites differ from even other conservative Mennonite groups, like the Old Orders, is their emphasis on geographic isolation (Quiring, 2003). LGS communities place a great emphasis on living geographically apart from society, whereas other Mennonite groups integrate physically within society. This desire for physical separation has led the most conservative LGS groups all around the world in search of places to live without state intervention. As a result, many tend to view themselves as citizens of the kingdom of God, rather than of a particular country (Quiring, 2003). This desire to live geographically separate has made the transition to Ontario difficult for some, as many are not used to living intermingled within society, where they are now not as self-sufficient as they have traditionally been. This separation has been used to protect the LGS community and keep their beliefs intact.

In the 1870s, a group of LGS Mennonites migrated from Russia to Manitoba. Their beliefs regarding pacifism and their traditional agricultural lifestyles were under threat in Russia. The promise of land and a peaceful relationship with the Canadian government was very enticing because they would be able to freely practice their religion, uphold their pacifist convictions through exemption from military service, continue to speak their German language, and control their own education system without state interference (Draper, 2010; Hershberger, 2011; Steiner,

2015). Draper (2010, p. 312) and Hershberger (2011, p. 11) estimate that 7000-8000 Mennonites from Russia migrated to Canada and began farming in villages that were set up in a similar fashion to the ones they had previously established in Russia.

The breakout of World War I brought about a number of changes for minority groups in Canada including the LGS Mennonites. Trying to create a more nationalistic and “loyal” population, the Canadian government attempted to assimilate the minority groups (Draper, 2010). While Mennonites were not required to join the military, some conscientious objectors were brought to court, and looked down upon by Canadians that supported the war. German-speaking Canadians also came under scrutiny as being too connected to Germany, and were looked upon with distrust (Hershberger, 2011; Steiner, 2015). Because Mennonites were exempt from military service, they were envied by many Canadians. Most devastating of all, the promises regarding education that had originally been made by the Canadian federal government were rescinded, since matters of education were under provincial, not federal, jurisdiction. As is noted by Guenther (2009), the broken promises and ill treatment have been a major source of the distrust that the many conservative LGS Mennonites have developed for governmental institutions (p. 11).

Many changes were also coming to provincial education systems that would greatly impact LGS Mennonite communities. In an effort to create loyal Canadian citizens, schools in the prairies only allowed English to be spoken. Previously, schools were able to be bilingual if there was a great enough desire by the local population. This pushed many Mennonites into private schools. In another effort to further control the population, all schools needed to be approved by the provincial government, and harsh penalties for absences were created. Many LGS Mennonites had kept close ties to their communities in Mexico and South America, and

would often travel there from Canada to visit relatives and maintain family connections. This transnational lifestyle was in direct opposition to the schools that the provincial governments were trying to establish. The penalties to those deciding to forgo these new institutions were heavy fines and/or prison sentences. LGS Mennonites were therefore forced to choose between following their religious beliefs or risk their traditional lifestyle (Draper, 2010; Loewen Reimer, 2008; Redekop, 1969; Steiner, 2015).

After facing continuous discrimination and attempted assimilation, many conservative LGS Mennonites began to look for new places to settle. They sent a number of parties to investigate potential areas that would respect their religious, educational and linguistic beliefs, and a *Privilegium* was signed in the 1920s with Alvaro Obregón the president of Mexico. This *Privilegium* promised LGS Mennonites freedom from religious persecution and the opportunity to run their own schools using the German language. Close to 6000 LGS Mennonites migrated to Mexico to start new colonies in remote areas. In their new homes, LGS Mennonites were able to farm and practice their traditional way of life, free from assimilation and discrimination (Crocker, 2013; Hershberger, 2011; Quiring, 2003; Redekop, 1969; Steiner, 2015).

Life in Mexico brought many economic, physical, and religious difficulties. Since the original migration to Mexico, a number of LGS Mennonites both living in Canada and Mexico began to migrate to other South American countries including Argentina, Belize, Bolivia, and Paraguay over the next 20 to 30 years (Draper, 2010; Sneath, 2004; Steiner, 2015). However, by the 1950s, economic and population pressures caused some LGS Mennonites to begin to return to Canada for either temporary seasonal work or permanent residence. While the colonies grew in population, the amount of land did not grow proportionately. Drought, land scarcity, high land prices, and lack of quality land all were problems for LGS Mennonites in Mexico and South

America, causing high numbers to begin migrating to Canada (Barons, 2014; Crocker, 2013; Draper, 2010; Fast, 2014; Steiner, 2015; Turner, 2012). Despite the fact that LGS Mennonites had been coming back to Manitoba and Saskatchewan in small numbers since they had originally migrated to Mexico, the migration of the 1950s saw increasingly high numbers also move to other provinces, specifically Ontario, out of necessity for survival (Good Gingrich & Preibisch, 2010). Many were able to claim Canadian citizenship because their parents or grandparents were Canadian citizens (Draper, 2010). According to Quiring (2003), a survey in 1992 found that just over 92% of LGS Mennonites from Mexico and South America had become Canadian citizens (p. 94). Ontario increasingly became a popular migratory destination, and by 1996 an estimated 25,000 LGS Mennonites from Mexico and South America had migrated to Ontario, with others going to Manitoba, Alberta, Saskatchewan and British Columbia (Quiring, 2003, p.96). Kulig and Fan (2013) estimate that there are now over 80,000 LGS Mennonites in Canada (p. 14) with at least 40,000 living in Ontario (Steiner, 2015, p. 483). With such a sizeable population of LGS Mennonites in Ontario, it is important that the education system creates programs that will be inclusive and accommodating of their beliefs and lifestyle.

A Social Justice Lens

Access and engagement in education is a social justice issue. A social justice lens seeks to remove barriers in public education, to create programs which are both inclusive and culturally safe for all. Such a lens is integral for uncovering the reasons why many LGS Mennonites are hesitant of alternative education programs. With this lens, knowledge gained can help these alternative programs improve so that hesitant LGS Mennonites do not feel that their attendance conflicts with their religious beliefs.

Since migrating to Canada from Mexico and South America, economic challenges for LGS Mennonites have also become prevalent in Canada. According to a number of researchers, LGS newcomers struggle with employment, literacy, language, and housing (Bennett, 2010; Draper, 2010; Turner, 2012). Because many lack higher education, they are unable to obtain well-paying jobs and are forced into poor living conditions. This is especially difficult in Canada where the cost of living is much higher than in Mexico and South America. In addition, many LGS Mennonites either only speak Low-German, or speak low levels of English, making it difficult for them to navigate various Canadian systems. For example, Draper (2010) notes that many are not educated about their tenant rights, and therefore are forced to live in poor housing conditions (p. 336), and Bennett (2010) suggests in these conditions they are putting up with plumbing and electrical issues. Because many in the population have resilient attitudes and believe that life is naturally difficult and that one should not complain about his or her circumstances, it has put LGS Mennonites from Mexico and South America at risk for being taken advantage of in Ontario (Bennett, 2010; Draper, 2010). Bennett (2010) goes on to state that these struggles have led to a loss of a sense of community that is so vital to the group (p. 18). The challenges of employment, literacy, language and housing can all be traced at least partly back to a lack of formal education.

LGS Mennonites often attend school until the ages of 13 or 14 before leaving to work at home under the tutelage of their same-gendered parent (Crocker, 2013). Many LGS Mennonites today still leave school at these ages to begin working full-time to help improve the family's financial situation (Bennett, 2010). Many LGS Mennonites are wary of public education because of their history with education systems, and the way that public education often breaks down the separation that is desired between their communities and mainstream society (Bennett, 2010;

Bowen, 2010; Turner, 2012). The misgivings that many in the LGS Mennonite community have toward Ontario's education system, specifically the alternative programs has discouraged them from participating in public education. The lack of education has contributed to the vulnerability of the group, where many struggle with poverty, low levels of literacy, and linguistic minority status. The low number of public educational institutions that Mennonites consider safe is problematic not only because public education is meant to be fully inclusive for all cultures, but also because this lack of cultural inclusivity is hurting LGS Mennonites economically and contributing to a host of other problems.

While many LGS Mennonites have been wary of public education, Bowen (2010) and Turner (2012) note that there has been of late a warming in their attitudes. Because the economic benefits of a secondary school education are becoming increasingly well-known, more LGS Mennonites are participating in some sort of programming, even if they are not completely in agreement with the methods being used. However, while some are changing their traditional stances on public education, many still do not participate, as there is often tension between cultural expectations and the expectations of school administrators (Crocker, 2013; Turner, 2012). A better understanding of LGS educational experiences is needed to create the type of environment where this tension no longer exists.

Literature Review

Education levels have long been known to be a predictor of one's quality of life. Possessing a secondary school diploma is found to be not only beneficial to the individual, but society as well (Hankivsky, 2008). Individuals who do not complete secondary school tend to experience greater levels of poverty, poor health, and less job satisfaction (Hankivsky, 2008). Studies have found that there is a link between education level and socioeconomic status (SES),

income, and overall health, as SES and income are both typically social determinants of health (Hankivsky, 2008). Hankivsky (2008) found for example, that individuals who do not earn a secondary school diploma make only 70-85% of the wages of their graduated counterparts, translating to over \$100 000 less in their lifetime (p. 18). Those who lack a secondary school diploma also tend to face greater amounts of unemployment, and less secure employment (McCaul, Donaldson Jr., Coladarci & Davis, 1992). Furthermore, those who do not graduate high school are not taught certain skills and do not establish the human capital that is developed in secondary education (Campbell, 2015; Hankivsky, 2008). Although this human capital argument is widely debated and scholars have not come to a consensus, the lack of a secondary school credential can lead to what is coined by Campbell (2015) as the “sheepskin effect” (p. 624): when employers are presented with limited information about potential employees, they are more likely to view those without a high school diploma as lacking skills and perseverance, or worse yet that they possess unwanted behaviours and attitudes. This essentially eliminates them from the hiring pool. While one cannot directly cite a lack of a secondary school diploma as the root cause of these outcomes, there seems to be a correlation between those who experience these outcomes and their level of education obtained (Campbell, 2015).

The Alternative School Experience

The closest body of literature describing an alternative school experience along the same lines as the alternative programming for LGS students is the Africentric school. Over the last 25 years, many scholars such as Dei (1996 & 1997), Di Virgilio (2013), Gulson & Webb (2012), and Patterson (2011), have been advocating, based on their research evidence, for the establishment of Africentric schools to better serve the needs of the black population. Higher secondary school drop-out rates have been noted in the black community, particularly in the Greater Toronto Area

(GTA). Dei (2008) for example, notes that drop-out rates in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) reached 42% among black students (p. 47). Dei (1996 & 1997), Di Virgilio (2013), and Patterson (2011) have argued for an alternative school experience for many of these black students as a result of their general disengagement and lack of representation in the current school system and curriculum.

While there are valid academic arguments on both sides of the debate, recent examination has indicated that schools “that centre on specific ethnic ways of understanding and knowledge are beneficial for students that have faced barriers in the mainstream education system.” (Gulson & Webb, 2012, p. 698). Such schools often focus on what Gay (2013) calls “culturally responsive teaching.” Culturally responsive teaching involves “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective” for students (Gay, 2013, p. 49, 50). It values the experiences of each individual and their families, how this shapes their views of schooling, and uses this cultural knowledge to teach and evaluate students in a manner that is sensitive to their backgrounds (Gay, 2013; Moll & Gonzalez, 1997; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). School curricula in both Canada and the United States has been criticized by many for being Eurocentric and often irrelevant for students who are not white, middle class, and of European heritage (Bernal, 2002; Joshee, 2009; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Culturally responsive teaching helps fill this gap, making curriculum relevant for students of all backgrounds, and recognizing students and their communities as producers of knowledge (Gay, 2013, Villegas & Lucas, 2002). A recent study by Duncan (2012) found that an environment that reflects student experiences and, is relevant and engaging, will not only boost student performance, but also student well-being. Africentric schools aim to do this for the African-Canadian student population. Dei

(1996) reinforces that these schools are not designed to exclude other forms of knowledge, but rather to add to the plurality of perspectives. They also aim to have staff and administrators who are reflective of the student population (Dei, 1996; Patterson, 2011). In addition, the curriculum is reflective of students' African heritage, and is drafted using African examples of poetry, inventions, novels, politics, and philosophy (Di Virgilio, 2013). Overall, an attempt is made to make the curriculum and school experience much more relevant for African-Canadian students, in turn engaging them so that they do not become estranged from the education system.

Although this body of literature speaks to a different group of people, the themes and philosophy can be applied to the LGS population. Similarly in LGS communities, graduation rates are quite low. As Brubacher (2013), Martens (1975) and Sider (2006) have discovered, many LGS Mennonites feel that their unique experiences have not been reflected or even welcomed in the public education system in Ontario. Similar to the Africentric schools that have been created in TDSB, alternative school programs for Mennonites aim to create an environment that is relevant and engaging for Mennonite students. While not everyone in these minority populations may feel that such alternative programs are necessary, there are many who do advocate for them. And although Ontario's education curriculum has continually been improving and genuinely aims to be inclusive and relevant for all populations and communities, the evidence shows, that while there has been some success, there is still much work to be done. Because many LGS Mennonite and African-Canadian students do not feel that their experiences are reflected in the Ontario curriculum, there has been a particular disengagement with these populations in mainstream schools (Brubacher, 2013; Dei, 1996; Dei, 1997, Dei, 2008; Martens, 1975; Patterson, 2011; Sider, 2006). However, as quoted in Patterson (2011) in the TDSB Alternative School document: alternative schools "are unique in pedagogy, forms of governance,

and staff involvement, and have strong parental and/or student involvement; environments vary and provide an educational experience suited to individual learning styles/preferences and/or needs” (p. 19), which aim at re-engaging these students. Clearly a strong need is demonstrated in the literature for alternative education programs to re-engage populations that are disengaged with mainstream education.

The alternative school experience appears to centre most strongly on students’ sense of belonging. Goodenow (1993) proposed that a sense of belonging at school reflects “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment” (p. 80). The literature suggests a strong relationship between belonging to a school community, and academic motivation, participation, and achievement (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Willms, 2003). However, not all students feel this sense of belonging. Disengagement refers to students who do not feel a sense of belonging and identity at school, and withdraw as a result (Willms, 2003). Student disengagement from school can be linked to a number of causes, and while many youth struggle, it known to be more prevalent in boys (Murray et al., 2004; Potter and Briggs, 2003). Academic performance affects children, as those who struggle early on are more likely to become disengaged in later years. The family unit also has a bearing on student disengagement. Lack of parental involvement, particularly in the early years of school (Bridgeland et al., 2006), family size, and transience (Murray et al., 2004) also can be contributing factors. Additionally, children from families with a low socio-economic status (SES) are also at greater risk of becoming disengaged from school (Balfanz & Herzog, 2006; Murray et al., 2004; Rumberger, 1995; Willms, 2003). Although there are other factors which affect student engagement, these are the causes directly linked to LGS students, which put them at particular risk for disengagement.

The Educational Experience of LGS Mennonites

A limited amount of research has been carried out on the educational experiences of LGS Mennonites. Most work has focused on healthcare and the health-related experiences of these communities. However, a tension between the way of life in the LGS community and various educational systems has previously been identified (Bowen, 2010; Crocker, 2013; Turner, 2012). In their investigations, Bennett (2010) and Bowen (2010) indicate that public schools have been viewed as lacking the moral compass that LGS Mennonites desire to help raise their children. Some of the content taught, and lack of connection with parents have also lead many conservative LGS Mennonites to be wary of public education. The transnational identity of many LGS Mennonites has resulted in high levels of absenteeism at schools, further leading to gaps between LGS communities and public schools, as indicated by Crocker (2013), Martens (1975), and Schartner-Hansen (1990).

A few recommendations have been made for teachers and schools to successfully incorporate LGS Mennonites into classrooms. While those in the field of education overwhelmingly have a reputation for being kind and caring toward their students, a theme that has emerged out of the literature has been a lack of teacher understanding toward LGS Mennonite culture. Teachers are essential in their students' development. Classrooms that truly value and reflect the experiences of LGS Mennonite students are greatly needed (Brubacher, 2013; Martens, 1975; Sider, 2006). It has also been recommended by Brubacher (2013) and Sider (2006) that teachers receive additional diversity and inclusion training to effectively incorporate LGS Mennonite students into their classrooms.

Ontario's educational curriculum and policies have been identified as obstacles for LGS Mennonites by scholars such as Brubacher (2013), Bennett (2010), Crocker (2013), and Sider

(2006). Not only do many conservative LGS Mennonites feel uncomfortable with some curriculum content relating to health and science, many do not feel that the information taught reflects their lived experiences (Bennett, 2010; Brubacher, 2013). Educational policies relating to attendance, early school leaving, and Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) testing have made it difficult for LGS Mennonites to maintain close community ties to family and friends in Mexico and South America. As Crocker (2013) has discovered, these policies have created a tension between the LGS Mennonite traditional way of life and expectations in Ontario. There is a need to revisit Ontario's educational policies to make them more flexible and better able to foster identity and community for LGS Mennonites (Crocker, 2013; Sider, 2006).

Many schools have tried to create greater awareness of the connection between education and careers. Although it has been observed that LGS Mennonites are increasingly joining the public education system and going to secondary school and beyond, it has been noted by Turner (2012) that alternative programs are often being tolerated, rather than embraced. Schools and classrooms must be places where students from all backgrounds are affirmed and can see that they are valued and represented. As noted by Turner (2012), there is a lack of understanding as to why some conservative LGS Mennonites are still avoiding alternative education programs for Mennonite students in Ontario. A greater understanding is needed of the barriers that LGS Mennonites face in these programs that are keeping them from feeling culturally safe and represented. This paper will attempt to fill that gap.

Methodology

Theoretical Approach

Critical Education Theory offers an insightful lens for this MRP. Paulo Freire (2000) and bell hooks (1994) each bring forth important ideas regarding the relationships between teachers

and students. Freire believed that schools were institutions that could challenge social injustices and oppression if they engaged students in their own learning (Freire, 2000). He did however note that schools can be guilty of creating power imbalances, rather than solutions. Freire (2000) was adamantly opposed to the “banking” method of education where teachers bank or fill students’ minds with “appropriate” knowledge. He believed that it creates passive learners and results in unbalanced relationships between educators and students. These relationships dehumanize both teachers and students. Instead, Freire proposed a reevaluation of the student-teacher relationship. Both need to work together through reflection and action if there is to be meaningful change. There must be continuous dialogue and communication between both groups, where learning and knowledge building are reciprocal (Freire, 2000). Similarly, bell hooks (1994) agrees that the classroom can be a “radical space of possibility” (p. 12). She notes that there is often an unbalanced power dynamic in the classroom because teachers are the ones claiming knowledge, not the students. Freedom is only possible when everyone plays a part in the knowledge being put forth and learned. In order for this to be possible, she contends that the classroom must be an open environment where the value of each individual is recognized and heard (hooks, 1994). This type of environment emphasizes a truly holistic model of learning, where both teachers and students take risks and are vulnerable. This insight from Freire and hooks is invaluable in aiding the framing process for this MRP. Through interviews, it will be possible to understand, to a limited extent, the perspective of those within the LGS community. Their thoughts will be heard on change and reform in the education system needed to successfully remove barriers and restore power imbalances.

Bourdieu’s cultural capital is also relevant to the Mennonite schooling experience and related to bell hook’s unequal power dynamics. Bourdieu described “cultural capital” as the skills

necessary to obtain social mobility. He asserted that schools could help students develop the social skills and principles that are valued by the dominant culture. The purpose of school, is not only to develop students' academic skills, but also offer them the knowledge that is considered desirable by society (Garcia and Guerra, 2004). Cultural Capital is created and valued by dominant groups in society and is passed down to future generations (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1986). When certain minority groups do not possess the requisite cultural capital they become marginalized. While LGS Mennonites that have migrated to Ontario may not possess the dominant cultural capital that is reproduced and reinforced by the provincial education system, they do have religious cultural capital that is often not recognized or acknowledged by many educational institutions. As Loewen Reimer (2008) describes, Mennonites hold a strong sense of peoplehood. They have a strong sense of organic community that incorporates theology, culture, and lifestyle. Similarly to Jewish culture, one can understand the Mennonites as a "culture of faith" (p. 15).

A second line of thinking is derived from the field of immigration. As one of the pioneers of Acculturation Theory, John Berry's voice is quite influential in the topics of how immigrants settle and adjust in a new society. Acculturation Theory explains the process that people go through when adapting to a culture different from the culture in which they originally developed. Berry argues that immigrant groups that feel unappreciated in their new location will struggle to maintain their cultural identities, integrate into the host culture, and develop positive relationships with their communities (Berry, 1997). Although many LGS Mennonites in Canada are not immigrants per se, the principles of Acculturation Theory are still applicable because of the intent of conservative LGS communities to remain separate from mainstream society. Berry noted that not all immigrants adapt in the same way and he thus offered four acculturation

strategies: assimilation, integration, marginalization, and separation. Assimilation describes individuals who do not wish to maintain their cultural heritage and seek daily participation with other cultures in the larger society. In contrast, the separation alternative (which accurately describes conservative LGS communities) is used to define ethnocultural group members who value holding on to their original culture and wish to avoid interaction with mainstream society as much as possible. Integration refers to an interest in both maintaining one's original culture and interacting with other groups by becoming an integral participant in the daily life of larger society (considered the ideal acculturation strategy for immigrants in Canada); and marginalization refers to persons who perceive little possibility or indicate no interest in cultural maintenance (often for reasons of enforced cultural loss) and little interest in having relations with other groups (often for reasons of discrimination) (Berry, 1997).

One of the findings from this research, which will be discussed later in the MRP, was the preference of many in Low German Speaking communities to work for other Mennonite-owned businesses. Raymond Breton (1964) refers to the phenomenon of ethnic groups providing services for themselves as "institutional completeness." A well-known example of this, described by Wilson and Portes (1980) was in the Cuban enclaves in Miami. Portes, Clark, and Lopez (1982) found that in 1979, 20% of Cuban immigrants were self-employed, while 49% were employed by a co-ethnic, enabling this group to maintain close contact without heavily relying on those from other groups. Similarly to the Cuban enclaves in Miami, many LGS Mennonite men live in self-contained ethnic enclaves, which use, according to Putnam (2000) bonding social capital (social connections with close friends and relatives rather than bridging connections with strangers) to gain employment. It is because they have been able to use

bonding social capital to get work in Mennonite-owned businesses that these young men have not needed to earn a high school diploma and hence, they avoid joining the mainstream society.

With this theoretical literature in mind, this MRP maintains that the structure of Ontario's publicly funded schools and some of the curriculum materials taught have been known to distance LGS Mennonites who wish to maintain their religious beliefs and cultural practices, both because of worries about curriculum, but also because of the danger of losing their Mennonite cultural beliefs. The lack of participation in alternative education programs has resulted in the LGS Mennonites lacking the requisite cultural capital that is necessary to function in today's society. This lack of cultural capital has ultimately contributed to economic difficulties within their communities. Through acculturation into Canadian society, these youth are expected to adopt the cultural capital that will enhance their academic performance and help their automatic transition to postsecondary education. However, adopting these aspects of the host culture undervalues their religious cultural capital and can lead to acculturative stress, which has already been noted in the LGS Mennonite community (Bennett, 2010). Making alternative education programs for conservative Mennonite students more accessible by eliminating cultural barriers would help LGS Mennonites to build the cultural capital that a secondary school diploma brings, while addressing the tension by attending mainstream schools.

Participant Recruitment, Data Collection and Analysis

This small study of the reasons behind the hesitancy that the LGS community has toward publicly funded alternative education programs in Ontario is based on qualitative data collected over a two-month period through semi-structured interviews and a brief open-ended survey for teachers and social service workers. Thirteen men of LGS Mennonite background were

interviewed for the study.¹ These men were between the ages of 16-33 with the average being 24 years of age. They were from a variety of life stages. Some were married, others were single. All but one were not currently attending some kind of schooling. Seven of these men were born in Canada, and those who were not born in Canada have been in the country for at least six years. All of the participants, with the exception of one, were either born or descended from parents or grandparents who were born in the Durango Colony in Northern Mexico.² The Durango Colony is known to be one of the more conservative colonies in that country. The participant not from the Durango Colony was from the Chihuahua Colony, which is north of the Durango Colony.

While there have been studies regarding LGS Mennonites' views on public education, there is a need for an understanding of the barriers that many still face in alternative programs (Schartner-Hansen, 1990; Turner, 2012). To come to that understanding in as much detail as possible, my interviews with the 13 LGS men were semi-structured using open-ended and flexible questions to allow respondents to elaborate on points of interest. The interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes and took place in spaces chosen by the LGS men. I met with the majority of the participants in coffee shops. Where a nearby coffee shop was not available, I met a couple of the participants in public libraries. Most of these shops were places that these men frequented, or were comfortable going. All seemed very comfortable and relaxed in opening up to answer questions about their lives. Interview questions focused on their experiences in alternative education programs, elementary school, and work experience. I also asked open-ended questions about their hopes, and dreams, their values, and how they define success. Although most of these men are also able to speak Low German fluently, all of the interviews were conducted in English.

¹ See Table 1 in Appendices for LGS participant info

² See Figure 1 in Appendices for original Mennonite settlements in Mexico

Additionally, I interviewed two teachers who have been involved with alternative programs. Finally, 16 teachers and various social service workers completed a brief open-ended survey. I was able to get in touch with all of these individuals through personal and professional connections.

The population sample relied on in this study was very much purposeful in nature. I did not target LGS men who originated from a specific region in Mexico, rather, I relied on community connections to find research participants. I know some individuals in the LGS community through my own schooling as well as work experience. These individuals acted as contacts to reach and recruit other members in the LGS community (i.e. snowball sampling). I do acknowledge that this kind of purposeful sample 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. This type of sampling was nonetheless helpful in that it was important to make a personal connection with each participant at their interview. I had a personal connection to each one through some sort, whether that was through friends, family, or mutual acquaintances. Having this personal connection seemed to make a big difference in the levels of openness that these men showed during the interviews. The research participants who were recruited all lived within roughly a 30 minutes from either Elmira, Listowel, or Drayton, Ontario.³ Those that had participated in alternative education programs had done so in either the AMDSB, WRDSB, or UGDSB.

Communicating with these Low German men also happened in a way that was surprising. Mennonites, particularly ones that fall on the conservative end of the spectrum, have been stereotyped as being against the use of all modern technology. The men who participated in this

³ See Figure 2 in Appendices for map.

project proved that this stereotype is just that - a stereotype. I communicated to all of them via text message to set up a time and place to meet for the interview. Many also had email addresses as well that they gave to see an update on this project. In addition, all were comfortable with their interviews being recorded. There were, however, barriers that were both expected and unexpected during the duration of data collection. One barrier that I anticipated was a difficulty in obtaining interviews with members in the LGS Mennonite community. Although I have Mennonite heritage, my background originates in Pennsylvania in the United States and further back to Germany and Switzerland. While I do have some contacts with members of the Low German community, I do not have any clear close connections to it. My objective was to listen to the stories and experiences of Low German Speaking men. I decided to focus on men only because, in general, LGS Mennonites are typically cautious toward outsiders. As a male researcher, with few inside connections to the LGS community, I presumed most women might feel uncomfortable participating in an interview with a male researcher. Although it was expected that there would be some resistance and discomfort with LGS males agreeing to an interview, it was much more likely that they would be open to the prospect of an interview due to my own gender. I also came up against some unexpected barriers with local school boards. I was not able to obtain approval to do research on the sites of some alternative education programs due to the timeline of my research occurring at the end of the school year, however through my personal network, I was able to obtain interviews with both appropriate teachers and LGS men.

Interviews were transcribed and I initially coded the transcripts by hand, and colour-coded reoccurring words and ideas. I also wrote notes after each interview reflecting on the experience and the behaviour of the participant. I used the program MindNode to group the numerous themes that were initially found, to merge them into eight major themes after

analyzing the transcripts several times. The initial coding resulted in numerous themes that eventually merged together into the major themes after going through the transcripts several times. After I categorized these major themes, I grouped important quotes, with short summaries, which allowed me to separate and write each section.

Research Findings

The findings of the research centre around a few themes, including views of the LGS Mennonite participants about mainstream high schools and their desire for private schools. While there were also a number of positive elements that the LGS participants noted about alternative programs, a number of concerns that were also raised. These concerns and worries focused on a perceived threat to the LGS traditional lifestyle and beliefs, a disengagement from education, and miscommunication about the benefits of education. While many of the LGS men interviewed had positive views about alternative programs, these feelings are not felt by all in LGS communities, particularly those that are more conservative or older in age. This is consistent with the literature surrounding LGS communities' views about these programs. Data from the teachers focused on the lack of support and collaboration that many feel as teachers of LGS students, and policy barriers that they face when teaching this population.

Future Goals of the Research Participants

Two themes emerged when the participants shared about their future goals and what success meant to them. The first was that of financial security. Many remarked that it was important to them that they were able to get jobs that were both stable, but also well-paying. While none of them were looking for luxury, they wanted employment that would ensure that they could live comfortably and pay enough to support a family. All of these men had experienced some sort of financial hardship. Many of their parents had worked in a traditional

agricultural role, or something related, in Mexico, which generally paid low wages. A well-paying job was typically defined as something that could support a family. Family was the principal motivator for obtaining a well-paying job. For Abe⁴, for example, a steady and well-paying job meant that he could spend time developing relationships with his own family. He desires to own a business someday, to be able to support those around him.

...it would be something to pay the bills. Something to pay the bills enough so that I can provide for my family and not have to be at work all the time. I was taught to go to work. Once you're older you go to work and that's it. But that's not it. There's a lot more to life than that. With knowledge you can do that a lot sooner. You can then figure out your priorities. Wealth is not a high priority. But people don't know that. Once you have what you've always dreamed of then what? If you can afford to take the day off because your wife or spouse or child or whatever just wants to be with you that day that is success.

A family-first mentality was strongly communicated by Abe. In his mind, success is not linked to material wealth, or monetary gain. These thoughts show a resistance and stark contrast to the capitalist notion of success, which is equated to material wealth. Instead, it is linked to the ability to support his family and to develop relationships with them to continue their way of life. This desire to preserve the LGS Mennonite way of life and family mentality was one of the reasons why many LGS people have migrated from Mexico to Canada over the last few decades (Good Gingrich & Preibisch, 2010). The desire to have a sustainable lifestyle and focus on family is now nearly impossible in northern Mexico because of rising land prices, violence from drug cartels, and persistent drought, all factors that are pushing LGS Mennonites to Canada (much of this the very capitalist lifestyle they are attempting to resist).

⁴ Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

A sub-theme that emerged from participants' definition of success, particularly from those participants who had obtained a high school diploma, was job satisfaction. Although it was important to have a job that paid well, it was equally as important that the particular job also be one that they enjoyed. It was important to have a job for more than financial security. They expressed an interest to have a job or career that would allow them, as Will phrased it, to get "a job that you love doing. Not just getting up in the morning and dragging yourself over to work."

Secondary education was seen as one way to help their dream jobs come to fruition. Abe was also 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. Following your dreams. Not just something that you can start without training, but something that takes time to learn how to do." For those participants who had completed their secondary school diploma, desirable jobs were those that required extra training and knowledge. While on-the-job training is clearly an important part of how they desire to learn, many also had aspirations of incorporating some sort of theoretical component as well - something that would need to be learned within a classroom in addition to the job site. 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. While many LGS people have done the monotonous and mundane jobs in the past that other Canadians do not wish to do such as picking fruit and vegetables on large farms (Good Gingrich & Preibisch, 2010), there is a growing desire and get into more specialized fields. Greater knowledge is also starting to be equated with job satisfaction, and is feared less. Where additional knowledge outside of the traditional uses was previously thought to

be something that would draw one away from the traditional LGS Mennonite lifestyle, some of these men show that it is possible to desire higher education and more specialized knowledge, while still maintaining a traditional lifestyle.

The Desire to be an Entrepreneur

One of the major expressed interests was for more of an entrepreneurial focus in alternative education programs. Many of the men interviewed hoped to start some sort of business in the future. Although most did not know the type of profession they wanted to pursue, owning their own business, often located in a rural location, would offer them freedom and flexibility, and give them the opportunity to live in a rural location, more separated from mainstream society as they have traditionally been. For many the routine of a job that ran from 7am to 5pm everyday was seen as restrictive and limiting. Peter, for example, works at a fabricating shop as a way to support his family. He is relatively new to this type of work, which is much different than the various agricultural jobs that he has held over the years. Peter feels that his shop job restricts his freedom, and keeps him from farming. "It's a good job but I can't get used to having a full-time job. I grew up being on a farm and doing whatever you want to do. It feels like a jail sometimes. It's a good job. It's fun, but my heart is somewhere else." Like Peter, others wanted to have a job where they could determine their own hours and schedule. They wanted to have the power to dictate their own lives, without having to directly answer to someone else regarding their work life.

Similar thoughts were echoed by other men. Abe, an employee of a similar type of shop, estimates that these feelings are felt by many more. "I think probably 80% of the Old Colony guys that work where I work, that is pretty much everybody's thing. To be outside. To not be confined to one box." Jobs like these seem to take away the flexibility that many of these men

desire. These types of jobs would give them the chance to be outdoors, be their own bosses, and have the chance to work with and around their families. Self-employment gives these men the opportunity to have that desired flexibility, to not be confined by regular work hours, and to live a more traditional lifestyle than they are able to. This flexibility enables them to look after their families, pass on knowledge, and give their children the hands-on experience that they believe they need. To some, owning their own business gives them the chance to not be an employee depending on others for their livelihood, for others it provides the ability to pursue something that they are interested in. Having a general understanding of a number of different occupations would decrease their dependence on other businesses to do their own work for them. As Abe explained,

Anything that would do that. Being self-sufficient. Working at home. Farming. Making your own things. Working at home and doing whatever you could to stay at home. It would be a different experience than what I've had growing up. Always working indoors. Always being locked up inside.

In short, many of the LG men would like to return to a more self-sufficient lifestyle that their parents and grandparents had before they came to Canada. These same men also hope to live on rural properties, either farming or having a big shop in which to do work. Many feel that owning such properties would help them revisit the traditions of older generations, and free them from the restrictive nature of their current jobs, hence giving them the flexibility to live life in the way that they want to.

Preference to live in a Rural Location

Virtually all of the LGS men interviewed also shared a longing to live in a rural area. Many were living in small towns or cities and hoped to live in a more rural setting within the

next five years. Moving to a country location with a shop to work on vehicles or do home projects was very important. Having those types of resources to do home projects is one way to the self-sufficiency that many desired. By way of illustration, Matthew has dreams of owning a large property where he is able to do work:

I would love a country lot. My dream place I would like 50 acres +. Bush with some workable land. A nice detached shop to park my vehicles in and work on. That is my dream place. Depending on what stage of life I was in I would maybe have a beef cow or two to feed our family but I wouldn't raise animals. Something small as a hobby.

Similarly, Josh expressed an interest in getting away from the city.

I don't personally want to live in a city. I'd like to have a place with at least 5 acres. Out in the middle of nowhere. I don't like living in the city at all. It'd like to have a house where I'd have my project car and could work on it there. I've never had the time or money to do it.

This longing to live in rural areas stems back to the Low German desire to maintain a degree of separation from society and has been lived out to varying degrees in both Canada and Mexico. As Frank put it, "I'd live in the country. I'd like space where there isn't a lot of traffic. Where it's quiet. Less people ." The LGS Mennonite colonies in Mexico are in rural locations in places that are relatively separated from Mexican society. Although some of these young men had not lived in Mexico for much of their lives or in some cases not at all, these attitudes have been passed down over the generations. Living in the country also gives many the opportunity to maintain the separation from society that is felt is needed to be able to continue living out their traditional beliefs and lifestyles. Being out of the city enables them to live a simpler life, free

from the distractions that cities and towns offer, where they are able to live out their beliefs about living separately from society.

This desire to live in a rural location, to either be separate to live out traditional beliefs, or to establish a degree of self-sufficiency is hindered by the educational limits that many of these men face. Not having a high school diploma restricts them from accessing many occupations that would pay well-enough to buy a country property, since many rural locations are quite expensive. As Frank noted, country properties in this area are too expensive for him and if he is set on a rural property he will have to move to a different area, away from the family ties that he has in the Elmira area. A high school diploma could set up LGS individuals on a path that would make it possible to obtain higher-paying employment so they can buy the rural properties that they would like.

Since the 1960s, policies and global processes influenced by neoliberalism (for example structural adjustment policies and the expansion of factory farms) have heavily impacted the traditional lifestyles of many LGS Mennonites in Latin America. This has driven many LGS families to Canada, in hopes of being able to take up their traditional subsistence agrarian lifestyles once again, since land is limited and too expensive for many. (Good Gingrich & Preibisch, 2010). Ironically, similar problems are faced upon arrival to Canada. Prices for farmland in Canada have almost continually risen since the 1970s, with the sharpest increases occurring roughly over the last 10 years. Small, family-owned farms are slowly becoming a notion and ideal of the past, as prices per acre of land continue to swell. Ontario, in particular, has the highest land prices per acre, with many areas that LGS communities are emerging being among the most expensive. Holtslander (2015) notes that from 2008 to 2015, the price of land with buildings per acre in Ontario rose from \$4,593/acre to \$8,417/acre (p. 7). At these prices, a

small 100 acre farm would cost over \$800 000 at the very minimum, not including animal quota, farm equipment and so on. In addition, the structure of farming is also shifting in Ontario. From 1991 to 2011, the number of farms has fallen by over 25%, while the average size of a farm has increased by almost 25%, or over 200 acres. Demographically, farming is also changing. Between the years of 1991 and 2011, the number of farmers under the age of 40 declined by almost 75%. Family farms with young operators are becoming increasingly scarce, while large farms with numerous employees are becoming more common (Beaulieu, 2015).

While a high school diploma has clear advantages, most notably economic, it may not be enough to enable LGS Mennonites to fully pursue their traditional lifestyles. Although those that complete their high school diplomas can earn over \$100, 000 more in their lifetimes than those that do not have the diploma (Hankivsky, 2008), there is an even more stark contrast between the earning potential of one with a high school diploma and a post-secondary education. A study from 1991 - 2010 by StatsCan found that males with a high school diploma made on average \$882,300 over this span. However, males with a college certificate earned 1.3 times more with \$1,137,000, and those with a bachelor's degree earned 1.7 times more at \$1,517,200 (Ostrovsky & Frenette, 2014). Figures were similar for females, whereas a female with a high school diploma made \$458,900, ones with a college certificate or bachelor's degree made \$643,200 and \$972,500 respectively (Ostrovsky & Frenette, 2014). Hence, there is a drastic difference in earning power between those with a high school diploma and those with a post-secondary education.

In sum, combined with soaring land prices in Ontario, and the changing demographic and structure of the family farm in Canada, even a high school diploma may not be enough to outright enable those that want a traditional farming lifestyle to have it. Not only is it important

that alternative education programs continue to become places where more LGS Mennonites are feeling safe and comfortable, there needs to be a push to dispel the myths of a post-secondary education, whether that takes the form of white or blue collar work. Furthermore, the traditional lifestyle that is considered ideal by many LGS Mennonites is slowly becoming unattainable as family farms are becoming obsolete (Beaulieu, 2015).

Views on Mainstream High School Programs

Despite the fact that some of the LGS men were in favour of their children going to mainstream high school programs, all of the men who still had more traditional cultural beliefs were opposed to mainstream programs. Mainstream high school programs have the reputation among many LGS people as being wild and unruly. This is consistent with other groups that have immigrated to Canada what believe that Catholic schools offer a more strict and structured atmosphere. Public schools are thought to be places where students do not possess a strong work ethic, lack a respect for authority, and bully each other. As Josh put it, “Well it would be different. A lot of the things we learned and stuff and the way they acted ere a lot different than the things that (my program) would do. More rowdy. I would almost say a bit more that they didn’t pay attention. That they were in their own world and did their own stupid thing.” Abe had also attended a public elementary school before attending an alternative program. He was glad that he did opt for the alternative program for a number of reasons: “It’s nicer because you aren’t in with the whole crowd of the high school. There’s a lot of unnecessary drama in that. The whole society of high school. You know what I mean. The whole environment of high school. There’s bullies and whatever.” Many LGS parents, and even their children, want to avoid such a perceived environment. Again, there is a worry from parents that sending their children to mainstream programs could also cause them to compromise their traditional beliefs.

Another interesting belief about mainstream students is that they lack the desire to be at school and learn. Many LGS students who attend alternative programs are there because they wanted to be there, rather than their parents sending them. This is sometimes different than many mainstream students, who may not exhibit the same desire since it is expected that they will attend high school. Aaron periodically attended a mainstream program and had a poor experience because of this very reason. He said, “I feel like in a way my friends didn’t really care much for school work. I wanted to do good in school, but because they were my friends you were expected not to care about it either. I guess it was the friends I had”. He also felt like he did not fit in because of his LGS background, and he was not able to access the support that he needed.

Private Schools

The perceived environments of public schools have had a big effect on a large number of LGS people wanting their own private elementary and secondary schools. There are a number of reasons why many LGS people are not supportive of mainstream elementary or secondary programs, which has led to the desire and creation of their own schools throughout Ontario. One of the main reasons that many LGS families are not supportive of the public school system is because of a loss of tradition and heritage. Coming from a cultural and linguistic minority, LGS culture and history are not widely taught in most schools, even ones that high numbers of LGS students attend. Some in the community have noted a need for separate schools to avoid assimilation and to hold onto their traditional beliefs. Many LGS people speak Low German, also known as Plautdietsch, as well as English. Plautdietsch defines the LGS Mennonites as both a culture and an identity. Some feel that this has led to a preference in many LGS young people to speak English rather than Low German. Others have felt pressured to do away with more traditional dress, and to blend in with non-Mennonite students in public schools. This desire to

hold onto their heritage has sparked the emergence of private schools by more traditional LGS Mennonites. When commenting on why the newest LGS school in Brussels, Ontario was created, Josh said:

That way the Old Colony people could stick together. I guess they felt that the background was fading. The kids were going their own ways and not staying Old Colony very much. They hear you speak Old Colony, but they could speak English too but it was they couldn't do a lot of things that you can't do in public school. The language and the way you act and the way you dress was just different.

The desire to maintain a separation and continue with tradition is an attitude that LGS people have carried for decades, and is one of the reasons why they originally left Canada for Mexico in the 1920s.

Another reason some have been inclined to establish their own schools is because of objections to curriculum content. Many have taken issue with the new Sexual Education curriculum brought about in 2015, and an openness to discussing human sexuality, physical education units on dance, as well as teachings of evolution. Additionally, many do not see their experiences represented in the curriculum, or feel that it is relevant to them. One veteran elementary school teacher admitted the difficulty that she faces in making the curriculum culturally relevant for her LGS students. In her opinion, the current curriculum documents are not particularly relevant to LGS Mennonites, and this is something that needs to be addressed. A lack of flexibility, particularly in some elementary schools, has resulted in some LGS families taking their children out of the public system. These families are more likely to keep their children enrolled if schools are flexible and allow LGS children to opt out of lessons that teach things contrary to their faith and traditions. Schools that take more of a hardline approach in this

area have seen, and will continue to see a lack of willingness with the LGS community to attend and partner with public schools. Flexibility and communication are keys all throughout elementary school, as those that have negative experiences in elementary schools are more likely to also distrust alternative education programs since they are also in the public system.

Views on Post-Secondary Education

Attitudes regarding post-secondary education were similar to the attitudes about secondary education. The prospect of a post-secondary education is almost completely foreign to many traditional LGS Mennonites because receiving a high school diploma is still a big step for many. Those that were more open to a high school education were ultimately much more interested in, or open to, a post-secondary education. While not all LGS Mennonites would be against a post-secondary education, those following a more traditional lifestyle tended to be at best neutral toward the prospect of college or university. The main reasons for being against a post-secondary education have to do with time, financial barriers, and employment.

Similarly to a high school education, post-secondary education was viewed as taking too much time from people's lives when they should instead be working and making money to support their families. It was thought that one should spend his time working while he was young and physically able, rather than going to school until he is perceived as "old." Post-secondary education was also associated more closely with white collar jobs, which were not viewed as favourably as blue collar jobs. White collar jobs were viewed somewhat with suspicion, as a white collar worker was thought to have less of a work ethic than one that worked with their hands.

This desire to engage in blue collar work is one that is rooted in tradition. According to Good Gingrich and Preibisch (2010), family farming in the colonies in Mexico is considered to

be the ideal occupation for those in the LGS community. However, if farming was not an option, there were other occupations that one could enter into. The colonies in Mexico attempted to be as self-sustaining as possible. As a result, some white collar professions were acceptable, like doctors, however the vast majority of LGS Mennonites tended to gravitate toward blue collar jobs (Redekop, 1969). Subsistence agriculture was also a way to involve the whole family in the well-being of the group. Many traditional LGS families worked as a unit. The increasing reliance on wage labour, particularly in Canada, has made work a much more individualized effort (Good Gingrich & Preibisch, 2010). White collar positions are much more difficult to involve the entire family, and are thus not as unifying. This draw toward blue collar labour has therefore continued into Canada, as a result of traditional and cultural values.

Another barrier to post-secondary education was the financial commitment. Many LGS families and young people simply do not have the financial means to attend school at a post-secondary institution. Attendance at these institutions is rightly or wrongly thought to be unattainable because of the high cost. As will be discussed in more detail later, many LGS youth give their wages to their parents for so many years that they are not able to save up the required funds to attend a post-secondary institution. There was also an aversion to going to an institution that required one to pay tuition. One participant mentioned that his mother was very open to him attending high school, but said that high school was the limit. As long as the education was free she was open to him attending, however when he was required to pay to attend she could not support that.

Lastly, there was a belief that the job market for employment requiring a post-secondary education was very poor. A number of the men interviewed either believed, or said that those from the LGS community believe, that a degree does not translate into employment. The link

between a post-secondary degree and high wage employment was not recognized. As will be discussed later on, the fact that it is easy to obtain employment in a Mennonite shop, where the atmosphere is preferable and a high school diploma is not needed, makes the pursuit of a post-secondary degree unnecessary.

While some of these beliefs, specifically those tied to employment, are well-founded, there is a misunderstanding of the place of a post-secondary education. While some alternative education programs have promoted the skilled trades, there is a misunderstanding of how the cost of tuition for these programs is often shouldered by the government, and that these fields can also increase one's chances for employment. Jake shared that it was his goal to become a licensed electrician someday. He knew that he would need to complete an apprenticeship, however he did not think that it was possible to get a job in this field. He planned on working at an entry-level position for a construction company for a few years before he could start an apprenticeship. The benefits and opportunities that a post-secondary education can bring need to be made more well-known to students while they are attending alternative education programs. That being said, until the myths and miscommunications are dispelled about alternative programs themselves, the prospect of a post-secondary education will continue to be an impossibility for many.

Motivation for the Pursuit of a High School Diploma

There are many reasons why LGS young men have shown a desire for a high school diploma. The young men who participated in this study were diverse in their reasons for pursuing a diploma and why they thought a diploma would be useful. Surprisingly, the financial benefits of having a high school diploma were rarely mentioned. Alternative education programs have touted the benefits of joining and receiving a diploma through their courses, however it seems

that many of these ideas and reasons have not resonated or been clear to many in the LGS community.

Some of the most common reasons for pursuing a high school diploma were job requirements and in case Ontario labour laws would ever change in the future. One participant however was somewhat aware of the economic benefit of a high school diploma. Will, a student currently in an alternative high school program shared that the main reason he would pursue a diploma would be so that he would not be limited in his future job search. “There are so many jobs, even the simple jobs, just because you have a gr. 12 diploma they’ll hire you way sooner than if you don’t. That’s pretty much the only reason I want the diploma. If I want a certain job then I won’t have to worry about that.” Despite knowing this information, he was not convinced that he would end up completing his diploma. He did not have a specific career objective in mind, and did not feel that the diploma would help him personally. He also had the option to work at an uncle’s shop, where he had been working part-time for a while already. He did not need the diploma to work there, so it was not crucial that he had it. Will was the only interviewee that mentioned the financial benefits of a high school diploma.

Similarly, a diploma was also thought to open doors to white collar employment, or highly skilled jobs in the trades, like an electrician or plumber. Although these ideas were expressed, other LGS men interviewed were currently working in office positions in Mennonite-owned businesses, or knew others in office positions who did not have diplomas. Being able to stay within the Mennonite community has made a diploma unnecessary, even for white collar work. Josh, who had completed his diploma through an alternative program, said his motivation was in case Ontario changed its labour laws. He did not want to ever be denied a job because he did not have a diploma. “I don’t think you would have needed to have your schooling for that at

all, but I figured it would help in the future anyways. If laws were to change. That's the main reason why I did it that way if laws changed that way I could still have my job." Lastly, one man had originally pursued a diploma in a mainstream program because he wanted to become an electrician. After a bad experience in the program, he abandoned these dreams to work instead in various Mennonite-owned shops. Even though he recognized that a diploma was necessary for certain jobs, this was not well-known with the other participants. Other reasons for pursuing a high school diploma included the development of writing and language skills, and the development of non-transferrable skills. Interestingly, the men that expressed these thoughts had not pursued a diploma.

Support for Alternative Education Programs

Despite the fact that many people are still cautious toward them, alternative education programs have seen rising support from a number of members of the LGS Mennonite community for a variety of reasons. These include the desire for an environment that supports and understands their faith/background, an environment that is free from "worldly" distractions," and the traditional financial benefits from co-op programs.

The desire to be in an alternative environment is one of the main reasons why Low German parents and their children are enrolling in alternative education programs. One aspect of this is to be in an environment that understands their LGS faith/traditions and is supportive of them. A place where LGS young people are able to maintain their faith is very important, specifically to the parents. Many alternative programs that are tailored to Mennonite students have a better understanding of these groups than mainstream secondary programs, or even most elementary schools. These alternative education programs have shown a desire to engage Mennonite and LGS Mennonites on their own terms and respect their traditions. One alternative

program teacher expressed his program's philosophy saying that they want to show LGS Mennonites that they respect and value their traditions and beliefs and that they want to: "find ways that to support and not change who they are. We want to not change you but to support you in who you are and give you some new tools so that you can actually hang onto that even better." Similar attitudes were expressed when talking to teachers from other alternative programs. These attitudes are helping LGS Mennonites begin to feel comfortable in alternative programs, where their beliefs will not be compromised.

An environment that excludes a number of negative outside influences is also embraced, as such an environment is thought to shield LGS youth from outside distractions. Although alternative programs are sometimes housed in the mainstream building, there is often a great amount of separation between these students and mainstream students. This separation is viewed favourably by many LGS Mennonites, as it allows their young people to avoid the perceived negative atmosphere of a mainstream high school that was previously discussed, as well as avoiding negative influences like drugs and swearing. Being able to go to school in an atmosphere with other students with similar beliefs and backgrounds, particularly other LGS students is also very important and attractive to LGS Mennonite parents and children.

Co-op programs are another reason why many LGS Mennonites support alternative education programs. Similar to mainstream co-op programs, students are able to get hands-on, and practical experience working at various businesses while simultaneously earning school credits. What is different about the alternative education co-op programs is that students are able to earn more of their high school credits through them. Students typically go to school for one or two days each week, while completing co-op placements the other days. These co-op placements also offer students the opportunity to be paid for their work. One of the major barriers (which

will later be discussed) to LGS students completing their high school diplomas is that they are expected to work full-time jobs to help support their families. Because many in the LGS community face financial hardship, their children's financial contributions are a necessity. There is also a long history in both the Mennonite tradition and LGS Mennonite tradition, dating back to more agricultural times, where children worked alongside their parents in their jobs. These co-op placements allow them to continue contributing to their families financially, while also earning a diploma that will give them the chance to pursue higher-wage employment that requires a high school diploma.

It is fascinating to note that LGS youth have been quicker to embrace the idea of getting a high school diploma than their parents. Many of the youth that go on to pursue their diplomas are doing so because of their own drive and determination, and they are the ones initiating their attendance at these public institutions. As their children are pursuing and obtaining high school diplomas, the attitudes of many LGS parents are warming. However it is still predominantly the LGS youth who are most in favour of attending alternative education programs. Aaron for instance, while he attended a mainstream program, had to convince his parents to let him attend. He said he did not feel like he fit in with other students because he was one of the few that was there because he initiated it.

I feel like in a way my friends didn't really care much for school work. I wanted to do good in school. The fact that I had to beg my parents to go but their parents made them go. They thought it was just something that they thought they had to do and that there really wasn't any other choice. You go until grade 8 then you get a job. That was the mentality we were in. I pretty much had to beg them to let me go to grade 9.

Similarly, Josh decided to attend an alternative program despite his parents' original concerns. After seeing his positive experience their attitudes have since shifted.

It was my idea. I didn't go for a few months but I really wanted to. My parents didn't want me to so I didn't do it at first but then I decided that I would do it anyway. I just decided that I would do it anyway even if they didn't want me to or not so. I guess they just decided to let me and then I just did it.

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 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 the year after that. As more LGS families are seeing that it is possible to attend these programs without compromising their beliefs and lifestyles, they are increasingly supporting the attendance of their own children.

Caution Toward Alternative Education Program

Outside Influences

LGS Mennonites, particularly parents, are still cautious toward alternative education programs aimed at Mennonites because they are worried about the potential outside influences of the programs. One of the main influences they are concerned about is the inclusion of certain curriculum content. Content that focuses on human sexuality and development, as well as the theory of evolution are particularly concerning to them. More traditional LGS Mennonite parents typically do not talk about sexuality with their children. When talking about LGS views on sexuality being taught in alternative programs, John thought that this was one reason some parents are still hesitant to send their children. "I think that's a big reason Old Colony parents

wouldn't want to send their kids to high school. More of a taboo subject. They would rather leave it and kids would just figure it out themselves.”

Teachings about evolution also go against their religious beliefs. This concern seems to result, at least partly, from poor communication, as teachers from different alternative programs claimed that there is no formal agenda to bring up matters of sexuality in their programs.

Discussions on sexuality might only come up informally, if at all, depending on the teacher and students. While teachings on evolution are included, they are taught in a “softer” way that is mindful and respectful to LGS beliefs. Although there is undoubtedly some content that does not entirely line up with LGS beliefs, teachers in alternative programs appear to be attempting to teach it in appropriate and sensitive ways.

Another concern that some of the young men expressed was the potential exposure to drugs. One participant Will, who had attended a private Christian school for his whole life, did not want to go to an alternative program because he worried that drugs and that this sort of behaviour would spill over from the mainstream program at the high school. He did not want to be exposed to those sort of “temptations,” as he put it. John, who had completed his diploma at an alternative school had a similar story. His parents had originally not wanted him to attend the alternative program, which was in city, because they were worried about the types of influences like drugs that might be more prevalent in bigger towns. They would have been more comfortable with him attending more of a rural program, but at the time nothing like that existed.

Lastly, a surprising theme that was brought up by some of the more traditional LGS 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 others 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 issue of mixing with other Mennonite groups seemed to be more of a concern for LGS parents rather than young people. There was the concern that mixing too much with other groups of Mennonites would result in the loss of their own unique and distinct traditions. While various groups of Mennonites have a number of similarities, they can also have many differences. Over the years, Mennonite churches and sects have divided because of differences of opinion and beliefs in theology and practice. Subtle differences between groups today, were originally very intentional and much more noticeable at one time. 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). Also, while there was a lot of friendly interaction between Mennonite groups in the classrooms of alternative programs, students still tend to stay with their “own” groups during breaks. Multiple participants that went to various programs mentioned how they preferred to stick with other LGS 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 students are present. Josh, for example, was the only LGS male student in his grade in his grade 12 year at the program he attended. Despite being able to socialize with other types of Mennonite students, he felt somewhat alone, even though he says other students were friendly and accepted him:

A lot of the kids had Old Colony friends so when they went to school they'd often be all alone. They'd rather them work than to go school and be all alone. It was just me and one of my friends that I still hang out with now but he was a grade older than me. Basically once he was out I was usually with the Markham ones or by myself. It was pretty good. It

was different that's for sure. I didn't feel as involved with their group. It was decent though, they were nice too. I felt more shy around them so I didn't really share any ideas and stuff like that.

Although LGS Mennonites are obviously not against interacting and going to school even with other Mennonites there is a preference and desire to "mind their own," as Peter put it. This is why alternative programs, such as those in AMDSB, WRDSB, or UGDSB that focus specifically on LGS students are so crucial and necessary.

Employment

The desire to obtain full-time employment is both fuelled by an often pertinent financial need and the desire to continue on with tradition. Many LGS families in Ontario struggle financially. Like other Mennonite groups, LGS Mennonite children will often give a large percentage of their wages home to their parents to help support the family. Most do this until the ages of 18-21. Many, although not all LGS families, have a present need for extra money to be able to buy essential items for their large families. The financial support from their children helps immensely. This has resulted in parental pressure on children to help support the family, as the family often relies on this extra source of income.

The idea of finding full-time employment after finishing grade 8 is also engrained into the LGS cultural psyche. Traditionally, a grade 8 education was all one needed to successfully pursue most full-time jobs. Those in the LGS community pride themselves and value a good work ethic. Entering full-time employment soon after finishing their elementary school education is a way to express this solid work ethic. Cornelius expressed this idea of keeping with tradition as follows:

Some would be fine but others wanted their kids to grow up the way they did. That's a thing they try to do. Keep it as their forefathers did. The tradition. We grew up going to school till age 13 or 14 and they want to keep it that way.

Similarly, Aaron described the desire to get a job right after grade 8 as a mindset, particularly a mindset that the community has had since before their time in Mexico: "They thought it was just something that they thought they had to do and that there really wasn't any other choice. You go until grade 8 then you get a job. That was the mentality we were in." With alternative education programs becoming more popular, and enabling LGS students to both go to school and hold a job, which helps support their families and follow tradition, the future financial benefits will hopefully position these students well financially so that they do not need to depend on the extra income to support their future families.

Lack of Information

Some of the fears that LGS people have in regards to alternative programs is simply the result of a lack of information or poor communication. Since alternative programs are still relatively new, there are still many LGS people who do not have any experience with the programs, or even the Ontario school system as a whole. This lack of experience has in many cases led to a fear of the unknown. John, a former graduate of an alternative program, said that many of his friends' parents were unsure and against sending their children to alternative programs because they did not have any experience in the Ontario school system themselves. Peter's mother, however, had attended elementary school in Ontario and had had a good school experience. Although she was wary, she was more open to sending Peter and his siblings than other LGS parents because of her experience in Ontario's school system. Peter, a father of younger children, who has not attended school in Ontario, but whose wife and children have, did

not have much knowledge about alternative programs. The only information he had was from some co-op students that he worked with. Aside from their experiences, Peter knew little about the local alternative education programs.

Additionally, there seems to be a lack of communication about the benefits, particularly the financial benefits that a high school diploma can bring. Abe partially completed his diploma at an alternative program. One of the main reasons was that he did not feel that the diploma would really benefit him in the future. He also had siblings that had obtained their diplomas by homeschooling, but were still working at the same low-wage jobs that they were before completing high school. This sentiment was also expressed by a few other individuals that continued to work at the same places where they completed their co-op placements. They said that they would not have needed their diplomas if they had known that they were going to keep these same jobs.

Many of the participants who both did and did not have their diplomas acknowledged the growing importance of a high school diploma, however it was usually seen as something that only affected the next generation, not themselves personally. This thinking can in part be traced back to the opportunities to find work in Mennonite shops and services, but also to the strong work ethic of many LGS Mennonites. Daniel, a 24 year old young man who did not get his diploma, spoke to how important he thinks high schools diplomas are for youth today. He would like his children to get a diploma someday. However, when asked whether the lack of a diploma has affected his ability to find employment, he stated that he doesn't mind working hard and working long hours, so he does not feel that he has been negatively affected. This was a common attitude as many seemed to equate their ability to find a job in a Mennonite shop with a diploma not being integral to finding a job.

Lastly, the ties between a high school diploma and the economic benefits have not been made clear enough to LGS students. Although the teachers interviewed felt that the benefits, particularly the future economic benefits, of a high school diploma have been clearly communicated, this did not seem to be the case. As mentioned earlier, most LGS Mennonites did not equate a diploma with the ability to obtain higher-wage employment. Despite there being partnerships to attract LGS students into apprenticeships in the skilled trades, many of the young men did not know any LGS peers that were currently pursuing such fields. The fact that a diploma enables one to pursue a higher paying job, such as a skilled trade, did not seem to be well-known. Many LGS men for instance work in welding shops. In regards to this, Cornelius said:

They don't know that if you finish your apprenticeship that you can be making a lot more money doing the same job. Maybe it's a fact that they are more about the moment and getting the money in that moment. So they don't really want to put the effort in it for the future. Maybe if they knew that they could make more money doing an apprenticeship and do the same job. If they knew that you could make more money as a certified welder than working for a Dave Martin.

Teachers have clearly been doing good work, since the programs are becoming more popular over the years and continue to improve. There is however, still a gap between students understanding of the economic benefits of the diploma they are pursuing. One of the main purposes stated by an alternative program teacher is to enable Mennonite students to ultimately preserve their traditional way of life. Traditional lifestyles, such as family-owned farms, are becoming an increasingly difficult means of supporting and sustaining a family. By enabling Mennonites to pursue other careers, like the skilled trades, that pay well enough to support their

families, Mennonites are free to still have small farms, but not face the financial stress that depending on those farms as their sole source income would bring. These points need to be better communicated to these LGS students and families, because they have not been clear to all.

Despite the fact that alternative education programs are making strides in their promotion to the LGS community, there still is a lack of engagement with the elementary schools. This does not help dispel any misconceptions that these communities have about public education. It has ultimately caused some parents to avoid the programs because they lack information to make an informed choice. Community engagement is crucial to establishing buy-in, and needs to be continued and improved to attract and inform more LGS families.

The Role of Mennonite-Owned Shops and Services

One of the reasons many fail to realize that a high school diploma can lead one to a higher paying job is the opportunity to gain employment in Mennonite-owned shops and services. LGS Mennonites are attracted to these Mennonite-owned shops and services for a number of reasons, the main one being the similar culture. These close similarities make these environments safe, as opposed to businesses that are not owned by other Mennonites and run by different principles. These Mennonite shops and services do not usually require a high school diploma of their employees. As a result, many LGS Mennonites often work in these shops and services. The desire to be with others with LGS background again works to attract others. These jobs are often obtained through family or church connections. Many of the men interviewed worked at the same business as a family member, sometimes even multiple family members. Abe for instance, works at a business with his father, brother, and brother-in-law. Will, another participant, has family that owns a manufacturing shop. Even though he admitted that one would either need a diploma now or soon in the future to get just about any job, Will did not see the

urgency to pursue the diploma because he had the option of working at this shop within his personal network. This small shop also employs a number of Will's siblings and extended family.

Additionally, these shops and services will accommodate for a lack of high school diploma by providing on the job training. On the job training was looked upon very favourably, as opposed to training at an educational institution for a job. These shops and services, which do not exclusively employ Mennonites, but definitely cater to them, offer a chance for advancement to office and even managerial jobs for hard workers. Here, a good work ethic, job experience, and time with the company play bigger roles in the advancement of employees than their formal education does. Matthew has a number of friends that completed their high school diplomas at various alternative programs. However, he feels that they are no farther ahead than he is, and might even be less successful than he has been: "I have friends that did the whole high school thing and got their diploma but in the end I see what they're making and I see what I'm making and they didn't come out on top. I'm glad I didn't but I wouldn't have minded to have the diploma." The ability to work in Mennonite shops and services has given LGS Mennonites the chance to work within their own or related communities, to find career advancement if so desired, and has almost eliminated the need for a high school diploma.

Raymond Breton's theory of "institutional completeness" can be applied to understand the draw and connection that many LGS Mennonites have to Mennonite businesses in the Elmira and Listowel areas. The higher the degree of "institutional completeness" that a group exhibits, the more self-sufficient they are in providing services for their members. These services range from education, employment, food and clothing, to medical care, social assistance, and religious needs (Breton, 1964). LGS Mennonite communities have typically displayed high degrees of institutional completeness in Mexico, with the community typically being fairly self-sufficient in

many of these areas. Their arrival in Ontario has lessened the degree of institutional completeness, particularly in areas of employment, as many LGS families do not own their own businesses. This has created a unique draw to businesses owned by members of other Mennonite communities, where the owners and many of the employees share similarities in their foundational beliefs and lifestyles. The desire for institutional completeness and separation from mainstream society has attracted LGS Mennonites to Mennonite-owned shops and services. The inclination toward institutional completeness also makes it crucial that alternative education programs are culturally safe and accommodating. These programs need to make sure that LGS students are comfortable in all respects, so they do not threaten the self-sufficiency of the LGS community.

Tradition

LGS Mennonites are hesitant to join alternative programs because of their traditional attitudes toward education. As previously touched on, the traditional view toward secondary education is that it is not needed. One is told to strive toward a good work ethic, and be willing to work hard because physical labour is valued and admired. This runs in stark contrast to the views of mainstream society, which tend to look down on physical labour. To many LGS people, higher education is often associated more with white collar work rather than blue collar. This preference for and positive attitude surrounding blue collar labour have almost disengaged those that do not understand fully the options that those with a diploma can have. In the time-honoured tradition, only grade 8 was necessary, as one was then expected to begin working. Anything after that was not considered useful, views held particularly by those in the Mexican colonies. 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 said they just thought that a lot of people don’t go so why would I have to. They said if I don’t need it then why do I want it. I can just keep working and then I don’t need my school so there’s no point in doing it.”

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 and thought to be putting off getting a job that would ultimately help support their families. Cornelius commented that in his friend group they poked fun at those who wanted to spend extra years in school. The extra four years spent in high school are considered a long period of time that puts one behind one’s peers. By the time someone might be graduating high school, others who did not go to school might already be getting married, or soon ready to start families. A high school diploma has simply been a foreign thought to the traditional lifestyles of many LGS Mennonites in the past, and although these attitudes are changing, many still hold onto them.

In LGS culture, work is closely connected to religion, education, and family. The interconnectedness of work, church, family, and education dates back to the traditional village lifestyles of LGS Mennonites when they lived in Russia and Poland before migrating to Canada in the 1870s (Good Gingrich & Preibisch, 2010). While one purpose of education was to train young people to read and write, it also functioned as one of the main components of religious teaching. It was not an avenue to specific careers. Public schooling in Ontario is disconnected from the religious aspect that many LGS people have come to expect. Without the element of religious education, additional schooling past grade 8 is thought to take away from family life, because young people do not have the opportunity to marry and have children if they are still in high school. In addition, the LGS identity is closely tied to working. When the acquisition of a

job is postponed due to further education, a fundamental piece of the LGS identity is missing, since there appears to be a “live to work” mentality, rather than a “work to live” one. The migration to Canada has opened new work opportunities to many LGS Mennonites, but has also closed the door on many traditional ones, like farming, due to high land prices. It is possible that the idea of completing both secondary and post-secondary education is seen as changing the cultural fibres of the LGS community.

Disengagement from Public Education

Throughout their educational careers, many LGS students have become disengaged with public education. Disengagement broadly refers to student attitudes toward schooling, and their participation in school activities. A student that is disengaged from school is one that feels like they do not belong, and have thus withdrawn from school activities in a significant way (Willms, 2003). The disengagement that many LGS students feel can be partially traced to a few known causes. It was stated in a number of interviews that many LGS students drop out of alternative programs by the time they reach grade 11 or 12. Various reasons were brought up including pressure to get a job from both parents and friends, the thought that they have spent too much time in school already, as well as the present need or desire to get full-time employment. These causes for disengagement are largely beyond the control of alternative programs

Disengagement is currently occurring as a result of the material that is taught, the inability for students that have fallen behind to catch up, and an overall dissatisfaction with the school environment. After interviewing alternative program teachers, it is clear that there are a number of engaging and useful subjects that are taught. However, some of the LGS men that had attended alternative programs expressed that they did not believe that some of the material they learned was practical, which caused them to lose interest in the program altogether. When asked

about his experience in an alternative program before dropping out, Cornelius said that: “I can’t say I learned a whole lot. Probably could be because I didn’t pay a lot of attention. Or it could have been because they didn’t teach stuff that I felt I would actually need.” Others mentioned that some of their peers dropped out of their program because they fell behind and believed that the mountain of work was insurmountable. Jake had some friends who did not think it was worth it to catch up with their work and stay in the program:

I think it could range from thinking you are doing bad already so just dropping out.

Some people just didn’t want to go anymore. Just thought it was a waste of time. I guess some people don’t put their all into it. Their grades show for it and they get frustrated. A lot of people don't bother to do the homework and their grades suffer from that. So I guess there’s always dropping out.

Schools cannot be blamed for their students not completing their work, however by increasing the number of classes that are deemed practical and useful by both teachers and students, this disengagement can hopefully be limited.

Student engagement needs to begin in elementary school. There have been many success stories where elementary schools have done an excellent job engaging and accommodating LGS families. Some of the men interviewed who either avoided or dropped out of alternative programs had bad experiences in elementary schools. From teachers who did not seem to show an interest or care about their culture and background, to disagreements about curriculum content, to not feeling supported; these experiences were enough to sow the seeds that would grow into discontent or disengagement. Schools need to be flexible and communicate that they are safe spaces, as well as take more than a token interest in LGS culture. Elementary schools are the gateway to public education that most LGS people have in determining how public education

is viewed. If experiences are not positive, there is a greater chance that disengagement will result in the future.

Parental Involvement

Various alternative programs that were researched in this project were found to have parent councils where parents are able to give feedback on the program, make recommendations about courses that are needed and so forth. A common theme from the teachers interviewed was the difficulty engaging LGS parents in these feedback processes. Although there often is this avenue to make their voices and opinions known, most do not take the opportunity to do so. Some of this lack of engagement comes from the traditional views expressed toward high school that was previously discussed. One interesting aspect of the parent councils is that many are made up of predominantly Mennonite men. More conservative Mennonite communities typically follow traditional gender roles, which results in the men being the ones more engaged with the alternative education programs (although this does not mean that female Mennonite students do not attend or that mothers are not involved). What is interesting in the case of the LGS Mennonites, is that while they are hardly engaged in some programs where they mix with other groups of Mennonites, alternative programs that cater to LGS Mennonites have seen a warm reception by Low German women. One program in particular in WRDSB called ULEARN has been particularly successful in engaging LGS parents, almost exclusively LGS women. There are a few causes that can be attributed to this shift, that were uncovered in the interviews. Because LGS men are usually the breadwinners in their families, they show a greater drive to seek full-time employment after they finish their elementary school education. Since many of the men also work labour intensive jobs that typically require working long hours, they are often not available to participate in school events. One participant suggested that the long hours that many put in at

their jobs causes them to be slightly more disconnected from their families than LGS women, who might be more prone to work in the home and interact with their children more. As a result, LGS men often know less about their children's education, and are not quite as engaged in the process because they are fulfilling traditional gender expectations by working long hours supporting the family financially.

There is however another aspect to this aversion that many LGS men show that is rooted in tradition and their own education levels. When discussing the lack of male engagement in the LGS community regarding alternative programs, Peter thought that it was an attitude that had its origins in their time in Mexico and beyond. "In Mexico," said Peter "the attitude was to mind your own and avoid interacting with people outside of the LGS community." While Peter was an extremely friendly individual, he admitted that it was initially quite difficult to sit down for his interview and open up to someone who was not like him, even though we both shared a Mennonite background. Peter thought that this attitude, combined with feelings of inadequacy were at the root of why some LGS men do not like to become involved with their children's education. When asked if he would be open to ever joining a parent council in the future, he said, "I would prefer my wife to do that. She has more schooling done than me. She would know better." This feeling is consistent with Lareau's (1987) research that found that social class (including level of education and income) are often predictors of parental involvement. A number of participants mentioned that their mothers were the ones who took care of paying bills and doing the administrative tasks for the family. Some thought that this was why their mothers were more open to schooling than their fathers, while others were perplexed at the opposition that many LGS fathers express. It does seem to be the case, however, that while these attitudes will continue to dominate for a long time, some LGS men are becoming more interested in being

involved in the feedback process for alternative programs. While Peter originally said he would prefer his wife to communicate with the school, he would also be open to doing so in the future. Josh, as well as one of the teachers interviewed, suggested that there is sometimes more of a language barrier also with LGS men. This might be because LGS women are more likely to attend local ESL classes and LGS men that work in Mennonite shops and services do not find it as necessary to learn English because of the high number of other LGS employees that also speak Low German. Josh suggested having translators more readily available might ease the worries that the language barrier create. Thoughts regarding involvement have been slowly evolving, and it will be fascinating to see in later years how traditional gender roles play out in the LGS community, and how these role changes will affect the traditional way of life.

Discussion of Themes

Acculturation Theory by Berry (1997) helps to understand many of the findings. Many LGS Mennonites in Ontario are encountering various degrees of acculturative stress through the migratory process, as well as through Ontario's education system. Living in traditional ways in Mexico, most notably in isolated communities with other LGS Mennonites, is impossible upon arrival to Ontario. As a result of financial barriers, due in part to a lack of secondary and post-secondary educations as well as traditional views, many LGS Mennonites are forced to integrate themselves in Canadian society. They are also unable to purchase rural properties to practice traditional subsistence farming or other small business endeavours. The inability to continue life in the traditional cultural mold has brought about acculturative stress. The lack of communal living has essentially been the erosion of a safety net to preserve the community. In the education system, although there are schools that have honoured and respected LGS culture, many have not. This has knowingly and unknowingly led to the assimilation of some LGS Mennonites,

through the loss of traditional dress and even language. Elementary and secondary schools need to show understanding and flexibility to help honour and preserve LGS culture. If some LGS Mennonites desire to integrate and practice variations of their traditional beliefs, they should be able to do so on their own terms, not because they feel pressured.

Many of the responses the LGS men showed a need for culturally-responsive teaching. Many LGS students do not feel that their culture is fully represented, even in some alternative education programs. Although there has been a great effort to create programs for conservative Mennonite students, the LGS individuals felt that there was not a proper distinction made between their unique LGS culture and that of other Mennonite groups. LGS individuals described the disengagement that has occurred with some LGS students from alternative programs because they do not deem the content relevant, or because there they feel that it is inappropriate. Others expressed that they felt some alternative programs seemed to lack the structure and strictness they deemed necessary. The cultural and religious capital of LGS students and community members is not being taken advantage of in a way that reflects the rich experiences and knowledge that the LGS Mennonites possess. This is in part why a number of LGS families are enrolling their children in private LGS schools. Incorporating culturally-responsive teaching styles into alternative education programs would help combat these worries that the participants expressed. This type of teaching would emphasize the cultural and religious capital of LGS students, uses engaging and relevant resources, respects cultural beliefs, and fosters a sense of community pride and identity within students. Culturally-responsive teaching styles would also help to create an equal power balance between students and teachers, an area that Freire (2000) and hooks (1994) have criticized public schools for lacking, and ultimately taking advantage of students. Even though efforts are being made by some teachers to include

elements of culturally-responsive teaching, it needs to be adopted by all alternative education teachers in order to create relevant and inclusive programs.

Recommendations

LGS Suggestions

It must be acknowledged that no two alternative programs are alike, and although there are some similarities between various programs, there are often a variety of differences. These recommendations come from participants who have had experiences at multiple alternative programs, so not all ideas may be applicable to each program. Alternative programs need to find the specific needs in their local areas, and serve those groups in the most effective way, rather than following a specific model that was successful in another area (i.e. a one size fits all approach).

Having a greater number of classes that focus more on starting and building a business were desired. Many that do not wish to work in Mennonite owned shops and services would find a greater emphasis on this area particularly helpful, regardless of the gender of the students. In some cases, small businesses were seen to be a way to hold onto the LGS traditional lifestyle where self-sufficiency is so valued.

The co-op structure and placement of students in some alternative education programs were also found to be problematic at times. According to one of the alternative program teachers, many students who complete the co-op option continue working at the jobs that they had before going to high school. With the consent of their employers, they are able to use the hours as co-op hours to help work toward their diplomas. Even though this is a good way to attract LGS students, because it provides hands-on experience, it does not seem like there is much of an emphasis on finding a placement outside of this realm, unless it is student-initiated. This

experience does not really set them up for knowledge that they would have gained outside of what they almost inevitably would have learned at those Mennonite owned businesses. Unless students have specific career aspirations they probably will not do a placement that would be drastically different from those in Mennonite shops and services. One criticism that was communicated by some was the lack of focus on helping students find non-traditional career options. Perhaps there needs to be more of a focus on finding a career that a student might find interesting or enjoyable rather than continuing to get students to do placements at various shops. A greater push for a skilled trade, or even other options might prove to be the spark that some need to try something new.

A further structural area that sometimes acts as a barrier to LGS students graduating is the completion of volunteer or community service hours. High school students in Ontario are required to complete 40 hours of community service in order to receive their diploma. This requirement has become a barrier for some LGS students because of time constraints due to part-time employment, and because working for free is seen as foolish when money is sometimes urgently needed by the family. One teacher at an alternative program has observed over the years the difficulty that many LGS students face with these community service hours. As a result, some have quit high school, even though their other credit requirements were completed. As Sarah, an alternative 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 grads that it is the only thing that they haven’t completed.” Peter’s brothers had a similar experience when they attended an alternative program. Neither of his brothers finished the program because of the community service hours component.

A greater emphasis on the teaching LGS culture was also suggested. Despite there being a similar foundation with other Mennonite groups, LGS Mennonites have their own unique history and background. 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. Others could not remember learning about their own history or culture during their time in the various alternative programs they attended, and expressed the desire to learn more. In his short time in an alternative program, Cornelius expressed that while he never felt uncomfortable in the program, his background was not overly embraced either. While this is admittedly difficult when there is limited instructional time, there needs to be a greater cultural emphasis on those days when students are to be present for class. A number of teachers and social service workers who work with the LGS population mentioned that many LGS Mennonites are not overly familiar with their own history and heritage. There is a lack of resources put into these topics meant to engage adolescent learners, and the development of such resources to use in alternative programs would surely be well-received. The inclusion of cultural history, as well as a shift in focus to the types and structure of some components of the programs may help increase the engagement of the LGS community in alternative programs.

Promotion of Alternative Programs

The administrators and staff of alternative programs have found many creative and innovative ways to promote them to the Mennonite communities in southwestern Ontario. Methods have included doing presentations at elementary schools with Mennonite populations, and doing presentations and question and answer periods at local Mennonite churches. Such promotion has been found to be more difficult with the LGS Mennonite communities. One

effective avenue alternative programs have been using to connect with this community has been through English as a Second Language (ESL) group classes. The engagement piece with local LGS churches has been missing though. One teacher I interviewed shared that the board she works in recently held an information night for LGS families, where there was authentic Mexican food, translators, and various activities to explain changes in elementary programs and the local secondary school alternative program. These efforts have yielded exciting results in the past, and these new innovations will surely improve engagement in the future.

The men interviewed had mixed reactions about whether they felt the programs in their areas had been adequately promoted. Some of the men expressed that, while local programs had been promoted at their elementary schools, the tangible benefits of a high school diploma were not explained well enough for them to fully understand its importance. Others articulated that the efforts put forth by their elementary school teachers were not strong enough to convince them to try one of the programs. One young man named Daniel remarked that there was not enough of a LGS presence in the promotion of the programs when he was in elementary school. Daniel said that while some of the benefits of getting a diploma were explained, they really did not register because he did not see that tangible engagement with his own community. Something that would have made a difference for Daniel would have been the promotion of the program by former students who were had a LGS background, and how the program impacted them positively.

Showing them that it does work not just telling them. If you can tell someone something they might believe it but if you can, show them proof. If they have stories that you can see that a sibling does better with a diploma and a sibling that didn't get it struggles more because he's limited to a certain job or variety of jobs. After you have grade. 12, your variety opens to other things that you can do. Then when the kids learn about it in school

they'll go home and tell their parents about it. Then the parents will see that even though it wasn't the way they were raised that they can see they were successful and have the Old Colony background.

Seeing former students who have LGS background and hearing the benefits of the programs in their lives would mean more to some students than only hearing it from elementary or secondary school teachers.

Another element that arose throughout the interviews was the lack of parental involvement in the promotion of the alternative programs in this area. As one alternative program teacher noted, information about their programs is often only going home to parents through elementary presentations if the students themselves are engaged and interested. This was confirmed by Peter, a father with elementary aged children. Although several of Peter's family members have attended alternative programs, he was very unfamiliar with these programs. Similarly, many of the men interviewed who did not attend alternative programs, but had friends who did, had not heard much, if anything about the programs. Although information can sometimes be passed on through word of mouth, it has not been an entirely effective method for the promotion of alternative programs. The fact that the young men interviewed who had attended programs were mainly the ones who had initiated their attendance rather than their parents, shows that LGS parents are not being effectively communicated with when the promotion of these programs occurs. One way that Peter suggested would help promote alternative programs to a greater number of LGS Mennonites would be through partnering with LGS ministers. While not all ministers are in favour of alternative programs, some are. Peter described one minister in his church as an advocate for LGS Mennonites to continue their education through alternative programs. Peter believed that this minister would be willing to

work with programs to promote the benefits of having a diploma. It is also difficult to find material detailing content for most of the alternative programs investigated. Websites need to be established, up to date, and easily accessible for parents that are looking for information online. While presentations at elementary schools are a good method of raising awareness, more needs to be continued to be done to engage LGS parents, as it is often they who are cautious toward the programs, and are the deciding factor as to whether or not their children attend.

Educator Support

The alternative programs aimed at Mennonite students in Southern Ontario have different amounts of experience working with Mennonite populations. The programs in the Waterloo, Listowel, and Drayton regions are relatively new and have not been firmly established for much more than 10-15 years. Some have been around for much less time. After hearing input from some teachers in local alternative programs, there are some areas in which they feel they could be better supported.

Training and Information Sharing

One request was for a greater amount of cultural training to be available to both seasoned and new teachers. Training is not consistent and seemed to range from training sessions developed by specific schools, to no training at all. Training done by an outside organization (such as Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) that would have more resources and knowledge was sought after by some. It was suggested by one teacher that training such as annual the Low German Networking Conference hosted by MCC in Aylmer, Ontario be mandatory for teachers who are new to alternative programs. There was also the desire for more informational literature on the LGS population to help teachers develop a better understanding of the group. There is a distinct desire for knowledge about current attitudes that prevail surrounding education. While

some literature is available about LGS Mennonites from various county health units, more is needed.

Collaboration

Collaboration with other schools boards with alternative programs was also desired. 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 for resources between programs, such as literature lists that are culturally appropriate or relevant, or even teaching methods, tips, and strategies would be greatly appreciated. One obstacle to such a large amount of collaboration is the underlying fact that school boards are ultimately in competition with each other. In the past, when alternative programs were scarce, students travelled to other school boards to get the programming that they needed and desired. Now that there are programs, sometimes multiple programs, in school boards that are in close proximity, there is some underlying competition to retain students and attract new ones to bolster numbers. While boards do need to be continually pushing the envelope and making sure that their programs are the same quality as those in other boards, this competitive wave cannot mean the withholding of resources from other programs. The only way the LGS population will be best served will be if school boards and programs work collaboratively to complement each other to set their students up for success.

Teachers with Mennonite Background

The concept behind alternative programs aimed at Mennonite students is similar in theory to the alternative programs in Ontario that are aimed at African-Canadian students which use material that includes significant works from cultural authors so that the curriculum is relevant to those students. These programs also target teachers with similar background as the students. The incorporation of teachers and mentors with the same background has a number of possible

elements, including helping students develop a positive identity and belonging in the school. Dei (1996) notes, for example, that in a study with students of African descent, many desired to have teachers that they could identify with and take ownership in the school. Similar results were found in this study. As already mentioned, while Mennonites are not formally an ethnic group, Loewen Reimer (2008) argues that they exhibit similar characteristics. The LGS Mennonite men in this study had similar opinions toward the need for teachers with Mennonite backgrounds. To some of these men, having more teachers with a Mennonite background would have made a big difference. Many of the men who went to alternative schools said that having teachers with a Mennonite background either made themselves, their parents, or others in the LGS community more comfortable. Abe described his reaction to how the teachers with Mennonite background interacted with him while he attended an alternative program. “The teachers are really good that way. Because they had the same kind of background, or similar. Mennonite background too. That was really nice.” While teachers with Mennonite backgrounds did not affect Cornelius when he attended an alternative program, he thought that having these teachers involved would make a difference to LGS parents. “Yeah it helped. With the parents anyways. Make them feel a bit more safe. If it’s a Mennonite teaching my kids it would make them feel more safe. To understand and connect with them a bit more. To have more knowledge about them.”

Many of those who did not have the opportunity to attend an alternative program remarked that having some teachers with Mennonite backgrounds would have made a difference to them or would make a difference to them if they had children. One theme in particular that unfolded was that having teachers with Mennonite backgrounds would make a difference, particularly to LGS parents that may still be hesitant to send their children to public schools. Many LGS students who attend alternative schools go because they want to go and convince

their parents to allow them to attend, rather than vice versa. By way of illustration, Peter never attended an alternative program, but he hopes that his young children will someday. While he does not expect that there will only be teachers with a Mennonite background at one of these programs, he does admit that they would help him, and other LGS, feel more at ease.

Teachers with Mennonite backgrounds appears to be the “it” factor that would most likely assist Mennonite culture and the way of life. Mennonite culture is very diverse. There are many different groups that either have very overt or subtle differences. Mennonite groups are also quite fluid — beliefs of one group often evolve as they are faced with new situations. It is important to note that while a teacher with Mennonite background might be able to understand the importance and subtleties of their students’ culture easier, they are by no means experts, as groups within the culture are very diverse. Clearly though, having more teachers with Mennonite backgrounds involved in alternative programs would make a tangible difference. Sarah, an alternative program teacher, believes that having these types of teachers is important. That was why she had originally applied to an alternative program. It is also important to note that teachers without this background can grow in their knowledge about Mennonites, and thrive in these alternative programs, although it may be easier for a teacher with that background to have a better grasp initially.

While there are currently teachers with Mennonite background at alternative programs in the regions I researched, there has been a noticeable absence of teachers with an LGS Mennonite background. Having teachers with LGS background would go one step further in helping make the LGS community students feel comfortable represented, more than even having teachers with backgrounds of other types of Mennonites could. One teacher further noted that there is a lack of LGS educators in her board and that this is probably because LGS people do not seem as likely

to go onto post-secondary education as some other groups of Mennonites. She shared a story of a educator, with an LGS background and who spoke Low German, went to an ESL group for LGS Mennonite mothers. The ESL participants were very receptive to the idea of sending their children to the school that where he worked, since he was able to communicate in Low German. Although he did not attend a traditional LGS church, the fact that he knew the language and understood the culture was a valuable tool in connecting with and making the Low German Speaking ESL participants comfortable with the idea of their children attending his program. Having more educators with an LGS background would be beneficial to students, their parents, and also to teachers. As Sarah commented, despite her Mennonite background, she still often has difficulty understanding Low German culture since it differs in many ways from her own upbringing. Having these types of teachers that understand the foundations of the culture would particularly help cautious parents to feel comfortable sending their children to these programs. Having educators with a Low German background would also target those Low German students that don't closely identify with even their Mennonite counterparts.

A potential policy barrier to hiring teachers with Mennonite backgrounds specifically for alternative education programs is Regulation 274/12 which was ushered in by the Ontario government in 2012. One of the key components to Regulation 274/12 is that it introduces the hiring of teachers for long-term occasional (LTO) and permanent positions based on seniority (Ministry of Education, 2012). One of the purposes of the new regulation is to “promote a consistent, transparent and fair hiring process for long-term and permanent occasional teachers.” (Ministry of Education, 2012). One of the main problems with a regulation like this is that seniority does not necessarily equal competence or expertise. This has the potential to negatively affect alternative education programs that need teachers with either certain backgrounds

or specific knowledge. While some alternative programs already have a difficult time filling positions because of a higher workload, Regulation 274/12 could potentially exclude new and interested teachers that lack seniority. Further study of the impact of Regulation 274/12 on alternative education programs for Mennonite students would be useful in determining its usefulness not only for these programs, but schools in general.

Conclusion

Although there have been Mennonites in the greater Elmira area since the early 1800s, it is not until relatively recently in comparison that LGS Mennonites have started settling there. The data brought about by this MRP has shown the incredible diversity in rural Ontario that is often overlooked and underestimated. The populations in rural Ontario are quite diverse, albeit in a different way than in urban areas, as is demonstrated by the great diversity even within Mennonite communities. This diversity needs to be acknowledged and accommodated in rural schools. Many of these recommendations, particularly those brought about by these LGS men, highlight the need for culturally-responsive teaching in these alternative education programs. Including topics that are relevant and desired by LGS communities, such as the teaching of LGS migrations to Mexico, as well as the inclusion of resources by LGS authors or similar Mennonite groups would place an emphasis on LGS culture. Additionally, incorporating more teachers with Mennonite, especially LGS Mennonite, backgrounds, as well as involving LGS community members like ministers and business owners, would foster even more of a sense of community for the group. Structuring assignments and activities to be more in line with LGS learning styles would also set LGS students up for success, so that they can use their cultural knowledge.

These actions are not the entire solution, but are a step in the right direction to slowly restore the power imbalances between teacher and student, as well as different cultures, that

Freire (2000) and hooks (1994) say have plagued public education. Incorporating LGS resources, community members, and teachers with Mennonite backgrounds is another step in the right direction. Supporting these teachers through proper training and collaboration between programs in different school boards is crucial. Positioning the LGS community as creators of knowledge, within these alternative programs rather than only consumers is also another important task. As elementary and secondary schools knowingly or unknowingly threaten LGS culture by assimilating LGS students, this new positioning of LGS members as knowledge-builders will make schools safer, less threatening, and ultimately more relevant for the LGS community. Because of the importance of a high school diploma and beyond, alternative education programs are integral to the well-being and cultural maintenance of the LGS community. It is essential that these programs continue to improve and to eliminate barriers to become places where LGS students are both engaged and re-engaged. This will ensure that alternative programs are places where LGS students are able to go to complete their secondary education, and even springboard to post-secondary education. Education and tradition can go hand in hand, if those in education will stop to listen to the contributions of the LGS community.

Further Research

This MRP took me in directions that I did not expect to go. While I expected some of the research results, some of the results were very surprising. Some areas for further research include researching and interviewing current LGS students in alternative programs. Although I was able to interview many former LGS students of alternative programs, researching current students would make the data even more accurate. Hearing the input of LGS community members that are alienated from the public school system and have organized and sent their children to LGS private schools would also shed more light directly on the failings of the public system. Lastly,

interviewing LGS leaders, like ministers, would also provide valuable insight on this community which places so much emphasis on church order.

Appendices

Table 1. Low German Participant info:

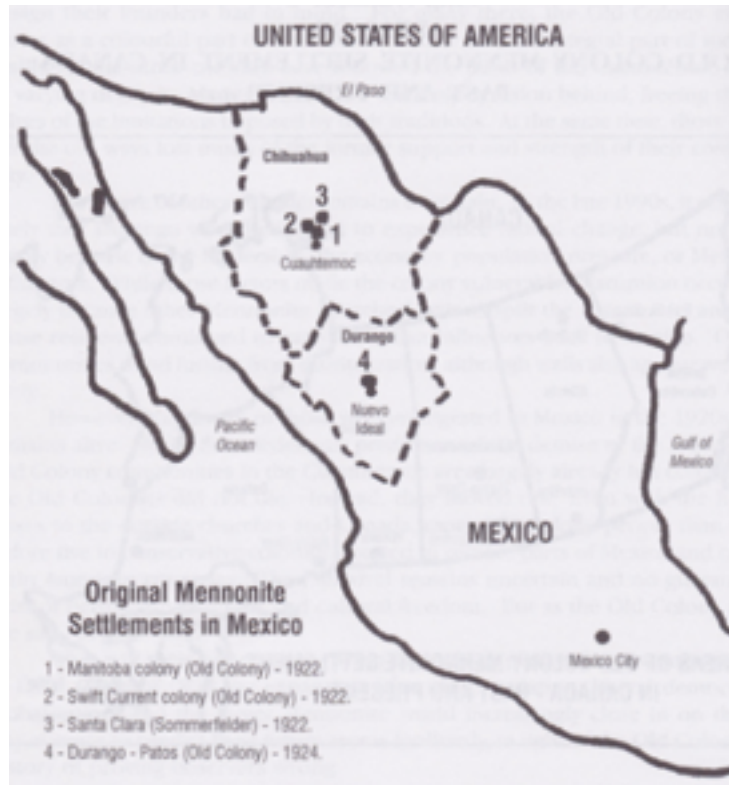
Name (pseudonym)	Age	Area of Residence
Jake	20	Elmira
James	24	Elmira
Abe	24	Listowel
Josh	18	Listowel
John	27	Elmira
Aaron	25	Listowel
Matthew	25	Drayton
Will	16	Listowel
Peter	29	Listowel
Cornelius	21	Drayton
Daniel	24	Elmira
Frank	33	Elmira
Paul	31	Drayton

Table 2. Alternative Education Program info:

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

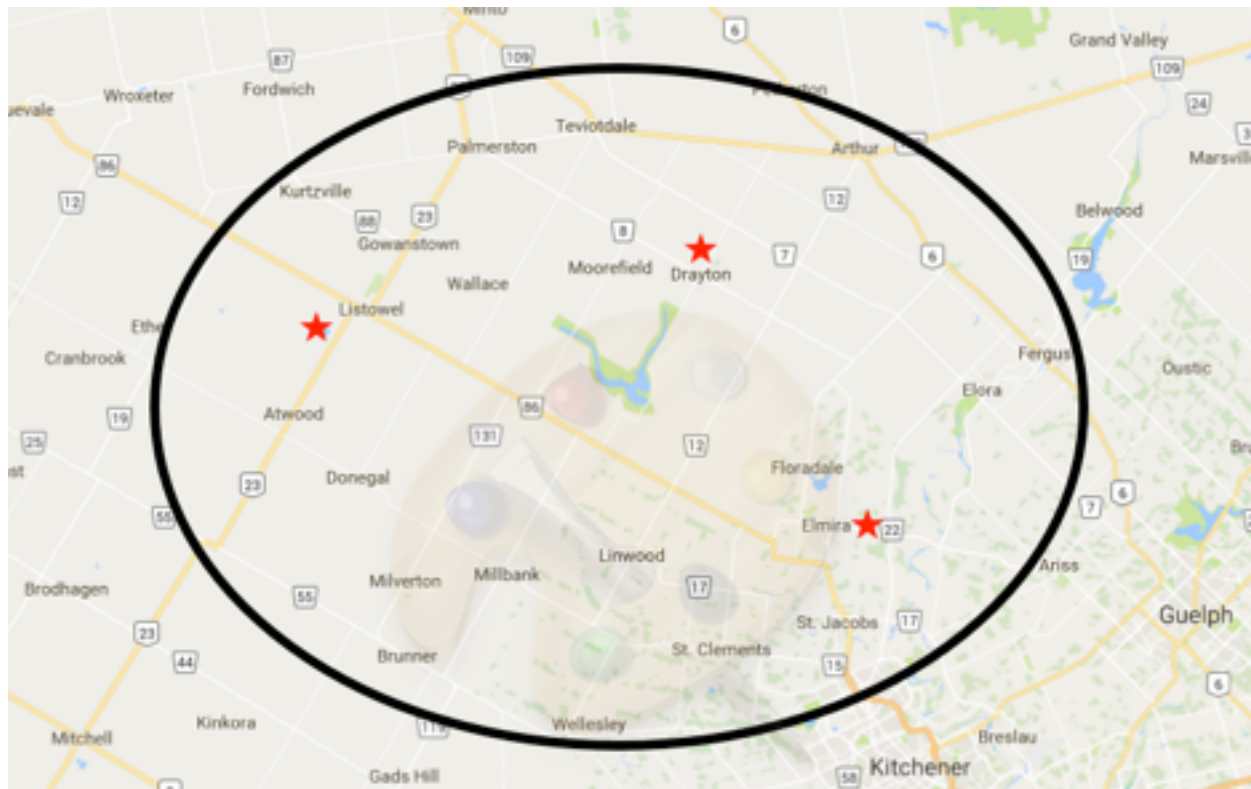
Mennonite Central Committee, 2014

Figure 1. Mennonite Colonies in Mexico



Quiring, 2003, p. 134

Figure 2. LGS Participant Locations



C. Brubacher

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