Working With Low German Mennonite Students

A Resource Guide for Educators

Written by Abe Wall with support from the Ontario Ministry of Education

Table of Contents

About the Author

Abram Wall (Abe) was born in Nuevo Ideal, Durango Mexico in one of the first Old Colony settlements of Mexico. He is the third born in a family of six, although his parents had seven children. His younger brother was killed in a tragic farm accident. All were born in Mexico and lived on a small subsistence farm in a small adobe home with dirt floors, no running water and no electricity. After years of struggling, coupled with the passing of his brother, his parents decided to travel to Ontario in search of a better life. Abe was six at the time of the move. What started out as a trail run of life in Ontario turned into the family settling permanently in Elgin County.

The transitions to Ontario were difficult to manage for the family and children. The weather, the language, and the customs and traditions that were ordinary for most, were completely foreign to the Wall family. Money came hard, with his parents working as labourers on farms in the area and the children joined the work once they were old enough to do so. Abe started missing school in the sixth grade to work in the fields to help support the family income. This pattern would follow his school experience from elementary through to secondary school.

The public school system was not always as safe learning environment by today's standards. Racism, both overt and systemic, proved to be a daily reality in school for Abe and his siblings. Not knowing English nor understanding cultural and social norms often led to bullying, harassment and treatment as though he was a second class citizen by both school mates and some teachers. School was difficult. Abe tried many strategies to deny his Old Colony Mennonite identity, but was often left feeling as though he did not belong. Wanting to be out of school as soon as possible (a reality for many Mennonite students who do not register for high school), he hoped to be done after eighth grade. His oldest brother, however, completed secondary school and would chart the way for the rest of the siblings to follow.

High school was a big and foreboding place for Abe. The racial barriers,

although different, were very much a part of everyday school life but he managed to graduate. After high school he went on to college to enter the world of skilled trades as a millwright. As with many Low German Mennonites, Abe gained a great deal of satisfaction working with his hands and the thought of working in a shop or factory instead of the fields was very appealing. After graduating the program, Abe found it difficult to find work.

He then decided, after much contemplation, to return to post-secondary learning and pursue a Fine Arts degree with the intent of becoming a teacher. Abe had a vision to make learning different for all students, including Mennonite students, than had been his experience. Abe went back to his former secondary school for the necessary forms and documents to apply to university. Abe's former guidance counsellor still held the post and noted that Abe looked familiar. Abe let him know that he was a graduate from the school and wanted the application forms to university. On his way to the forms, the counsellor stopped and asked Abe to come into his office. It was there that Abe's years of sensing differential treatment was confirmed when the guidance teacher made it very clear that Abe was not going to make it to university and would be better off looking for a job. The counsellor told Abe that he "did not have what it takes to make it in university".

Dejected, he found another way to get the application form and subsequently graduated with an Honours Bachelor of Arts from the University of Guelph. Still focussed on entering the education world he would then go on to complete his Bachelor of Education and Masters of Education to develop the skills needed to make a difference. Abe has made this the focus of his entire career.

After beginning his career in a conventional secondary school setting, Abe soon turned his focus on designing and implementing programming focussed on the retention of Low German Mennonite students in schools as long as possible, as numerous barriers still exist in transitioning students from elementary school to secondary school or completing their full K-12 program. Wouldn't it be amazing if, as school districts, we could achieve strategies necessary for these students to feel welcome, feel safe and valued,

with success in graduating secondary school (and even post-secondary schooling) without having to renounce their Mennonite identities?

Abe works to support a number of school districts as they serve Mennonite students through and equity lens. His latest focus has been the *Tu Puente* Program ('Your Bridge' in Spanish), so that migrant students can maintain their Ontario studies while their families return to Mexico over the winter months. Many in the education world would say that, for the most part, these young people are hardworking, intelligent, respectful and polite: model students and a tribute to their cultural priority for hard work and 'The Golden Rule'. And yet, the achievement data would suggest differently. Understanding that there are historic and lived experiences among the Mennonite community, marked by feelings of alienation and not feeling part of the group, the work to instil faith in public education is difficult but necessary.

Much of the learning gaps for Low German Mennonite students are a result of work obligations during the school year, not seeing themselves reflected in their learning, and travel to Mexico through the school year. *Tu Puente* is a collaborative effort involving a number of school districts across the province, the Ministry of Education and the Mennonite Central Committee, resulting in a classroom in Mexico. Abe is excited to see a changing narrative, where other educators are joining in the commitment to ensuring that each family in the Mennonite culture see public education as a way to open doors and so that no student believes that they "don't have what it takes".

Introduction

The settlement of Low German Mennonites (LGM) has been happening in Ontario for several generations and continues to increase. This portion of our community brings a rich history of culture and faith preserved for centuries. This pattern of migration has historically been one to preserve community values through faith, culture, language and education. While this may still be the case in some migration patterns, much of the migration happening in Ontario has been driven by other motives, often financial. Migrations in the past have been on a larger scale when compared to the individual family decisions to relocate that we see happening now. Although the motives to settle in Ontario are driven by individual family decisions, they bring with them an historic apprehension to involvement in public education. There is a generational fear and mistrust of education. Broken promises, negative experiences of parents who may have gone to school in Ontario, racism, marginalization and misunderstanding have shaped the narrative through the generations.

Figure 1

Low German speaking Mennonites number over 60,000 in southwestern Ontario.

Passive by nature, Low German Mennonites generally avoid confrontation with social agencies, institutions and agencies when it conflicts with their faith or that they do not understand. They are known to "vote with their feet", meaning rather than resolve issues through discourse, they will simply stop participating or attending.

Understanding is the Key

Understanding this culture and community helps to better serve them and change the historic narrative. This understanding deepens our capacity to interpret the issues that affect involvement in public education. There is value in examining current some education realities that have hindered some families' confidence in public education. Understanding the Mennonite movement, with specific focus on the group that is a part of the Latin American emigration, is important in equipping us to better serve them. With four decades worth of policies focussing on equity and inclusion, we are seeing the impacts of implementation, and the challenges of the application of these to the issues in supporting LGM students. A renewed focus on equity and inclusion is seeking to provide ways in which educators, educational administrators, support staff and students within the education system can reach their full potential. Across the province strategies that focus on inclusion are being employed to engage the LGM learner.

Figure 2

Signs of people having left for new beginnings mark the landscape of the Mennonite Colony in Durango Mexico.

People leave the colony for a variety of reasons. Destinations include several countries in South America, Central America, the United States and Canada.

Respect for the dignity of every culture and for uniqueness of cultures is paramount in providing safe and equitable learning experiences in our schools. This respect comes from a deeper understanding and consideration for these historically marginalized learners. With two cultures (Anglophones and Francophones) as dominant, the other perspectives in our schools are often overlooked, and can result in mistrust, misunderstanding and disengagement. Those learners in our classroom that come from different backgrounds are often faced with assimilation in order to fully benefit and participate. The line between integration (the incorporation into the mainstream culture while maintaining cultural autonomy), and assimilation, (being absorbed into the cultural tradition of a dominant culture) is thin, and those who resist these pressures to conform deserve admiration and assistance.

Figure 3

Students often struggle with balancing life as a Mennonite and a student in public education.

The development of equity, diversity and inclusivity policies is intended to stem the threats of assimilation and discrimination. The reality of biased

Many of our Low German Mennonites come from Mexico, but not all. Mexico has 31 separate colonies and within each colony there are multiple "campos" (settlements) these are assigned a number, but also have names; typically High German, i.e. Shöenfeldt. Chihuahua, Durango and Zacatecas were among the first colonies to be established.

curriculum cripples the cultural diversity within the education system. In considering these policies, we can assess their influence on the day-to-day routines of the LGM population. These policies affect our expectations, intentions or objectives. The Ministry of Education, and school districts across the province have a concerted focus on equity diversity and inclusivity within the public school system in Ontario. This determined work will do much for the future of Ontario and Canada by creating environments conducive to equity and safe, welcoming learning environments. To do this, understanding our communities is critical in moving the work forward. By incorporating people and their experiences in the development of policies and curriculum, which is the essence of multiculturalism, the historic narrative will shift. This focus will impact public education in ways to develop the attitudes, understandings and skills necessary for *inter-* and *intra*-cultural relations within education, the community and society as a whole.

Figure 4

The challenges in balancing home and school life often manifest themselves in learning gaps.

For most recent Mennonite immigrants, higher education has little value. Valuable learning opportunities are those with an emphasis on practicality. Learning for the sake of learning does not play a role in decision-making. Families often struggle with meeting basic needs, and therefore the value of school is often seen as secondary to meeting current needs.

Currently, a number of key factors in successful implementation of these policies are being given attention to support our LGM community. They include:

Figure 5

Low German Mennonite children learn to work at an early age to support the family and develop character.

- the support and commitment of senior administrators
- the political will of the decision makers
- a recognition that racism exists (and a desire to eradicate it)
- resourcing for initiatives
- community involvement for input
- validation and monitoring
- responsibility and accountability clearly outlined the policies and procedures
- effective in-service training at all levels. When these have been applied to programming for LGM students in Ontario, the response from the community has been positive.

A focus on equitable, diverse and inclusive education has had profound impacts in how we engage the LGM community. Doing this benefits students from both the majority and minority groups in helping them to become effective citizens in a multicultural and global society. A key

Low German Mennonites have a strong sense of community and conform to a common set of values. There is an avoidance of individuality but rather an adherence to a life of humility. The preservation of the lifestyle can be seen through dress, faith, and certainly the preservation of the Low German Language.

Figure 6

Involving parents has proven paramount in increasing engagement and decreasing fear and uncertainty.

component in the achievements our LGM students is often the result of discrimination, racism, lived experiences and generational trauma. To promote equitable and inclusive learning spaces, whole school approaches with structural, attitudinal and behavioural changes at the individual and corporate levels are a requisite.

The Ministry of Education and school districts are working diligently to develop and implement education practices that foster equality of learning outcomes for all students. This will be achieved when it is first realized that racism is structural and institutional. If we realize that there are systemic barriers, then those representing the system (i.e., trustees, administrators, teachers, etc.) can review their current attitudes, practices and interactions

Pride is seen as sin in the Mennonite community. As such, school is not focused on personal achievement and meeting goals, but rather as means for character development for preparation in eventual church membership. With many families facing economic challenges, school is a second priority.

to determine whether they are inclusive or exclusive based on race or other forms of discrimination. This understanding will include board policies, leadership, school-community partnerships, curriculum, student languages, student evaluation, assessment and placement, guidance and counselling, addressing racial and cultural bias, and staff development.

Figure 7

Generations of Low German Mennonites have opted for separation from the world for reasons of faith, and security.

Racism, or treatment determined by race, is caused by historical, social, cultural, political and economic influences, which result in the unequal distribution of rights and privileges among all people in our society (and therefore exists within education). Schools, as agencies of "socialization" (preparing students to become part of society) and "cultural transmission" (exposing students to cultures beyond their own) should access this power to facilitate change.

Traditionally, many Mennonites have avoided the public education system for reasons of curriculum, nationalism, militarism, racially pejorative comments by students, and the removal of Christian influences from the schools. Recently attendance in elementary and secondary schools has

The Low German language is used in day-to-day interactions while High German is used in schools and church. Low German is spoken in 16 countries around the world. It is referred to as Low German because it originated in Lower Saxony.

increased. The issues involving LGM communities and their education in Ontario are becoming increasingly more complicated. With an increasing LGM population in South Western Ontario, educators and policy makers can find themselves in a situation where they are not equipped to recognize or respond to some of the concerns of the Mennonite people. This has manifested in the establishment of private schools and an increasing number of families opting to home-school their children.

Figure 8

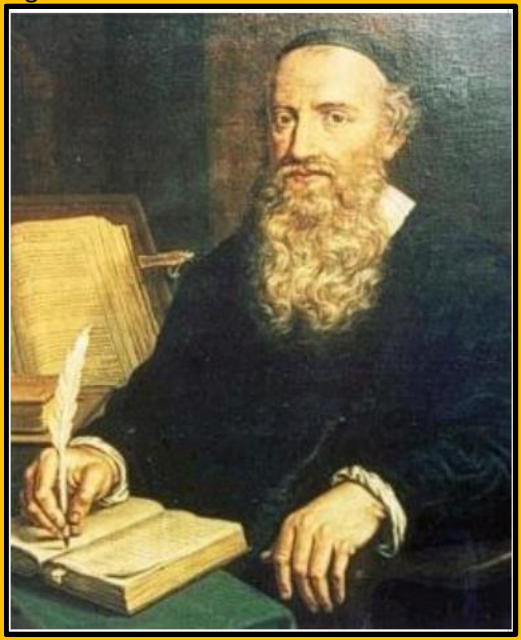
The Old Colony schools in Mexico have remained, as they were when settlement first began. Typically, a one-room schoolhouse, girls sit on one side and boys on the other.

To understand present conditions in any educational system it is helpful to have a foundation of historical references. Understanding the origin of the Mennonite people and their educational systems is essential so as not repeat the same behaviours that have created a rift between 'them and us'. Tracing the migration from Western Europe, Russia, Canada and Latin America is important in understanding the generational impact experienced by so many of our LGM community. Contemporary issues in Mennonite education in southwestern Ontario, specifically those who have emigrated from Mexico is a product of a challenging and confrontational past. An historical overview of Mennonite education will provide a theoretical framework from which we can hypothesize contemporary issues and plan accordingly from system, school and classroom perspectives.

Mennonites believe very much in that what happens; is the will of God and should not be questioned. Many have suffered greatly and see suffering as a sign of obedience. Their focus on the eternal is strengthened through suffering.

Western Europe

Figure 9



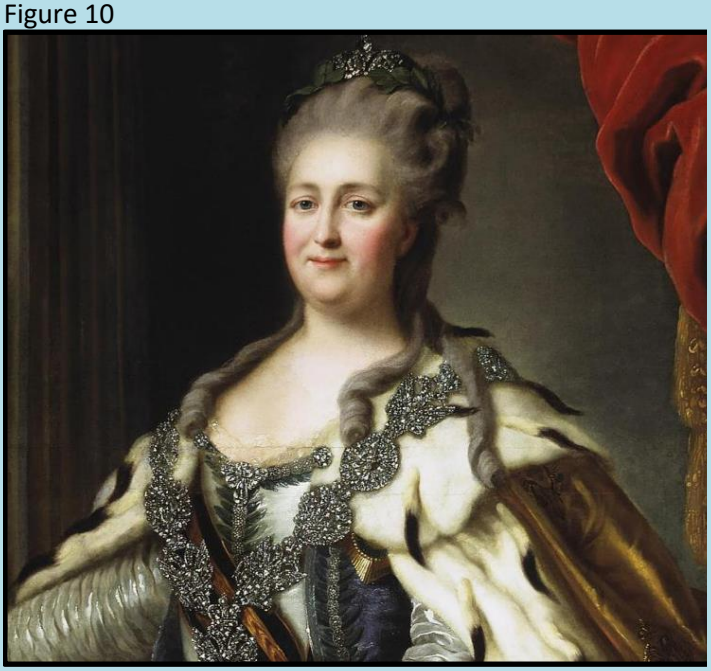
Menno Simons 1496-1561.

The Mennonite movement was borne out of the reformation in Germanic Europe, namely Prussia, Germany, and Switzerland, five hundred years ago. The fundamental tenets of this movement were to maintain a church based on the teachings of the New Testament, primarily focusing on Anabaptism, separation of church and state and a withdrawal from the political structures of society. They were named after Menno Simons, a Roman Catholic priest from the Friesland who was an instrumental leader with great influence in the Anabaptist movement. The Mennonite people took very seriously the notion of being in the world but not of the world.

The survival of the Mennonite culture hinged on the maintenance of their religious ideology and the German language. With religious ideology and the German language, a more heterogeneous cohesive community could be sustained, a community, which could interact with its members while not relying on outside influences. The vehicle that would suit these obligations was, and is, education. This point would be the cause of many future migrations, inter-group contentions, and political confrontations.

The Mennonite community seek to adhere to biblical standards as governed by the church. All areas of life, including conflict resolution are achieved through the lens of the church and church leadership.

Figure 10



Katherine the Great invited the Mennonites to settle the banks of the Chortitza River, 1762-1763.

For the less educated and more conservative Mennonites, Low German remained the dominant language with a more cultural High-German gloss on formal occasions and educational instruction. With their radical view of Christianity, the Mennonites found themselves at the mercies of host governments. Though many were martyred for their beliefs, many remained steadfast in conviction and upheld their doctrines. This pressure resulted in an even tighter knit group, dependent on language, on each other and an agrarian lifestyle for physical and cultural survival. This tendency would lead a mass migration to Russia during the nineteenth century.

Not all the Mennonites left Russia. Those who stayed continued to build their communities, businesses, schools and churches. The learning of the Russian language allowed for success in all areas of development.

Russia

Figure 11

The Chortitza settlement was established first and would later become known as the "Old Colony". This is the beginning of what is still called the Old Colony church.

In the 1790's, the Mennonites were invited by the Russian Government to proceed to Russia and establish colonies and farm some of the most agriculturally difficult soil of Russia. From 1800-1870 there was considerable migration. Each family would receive 175 acres and assurance that they would live without interference. Each colony was to be self-governing, the Prussian nationality was to be preserved, and communication between the government and colonies was to be through a representative of the Colonies to reside in Odessa. The colonies were to be ***exempt from Military service***, granted ***freedom to exercise their religion*** and ***maintain control of their schools.*** Complete control of their education held the Mennonites responsible for any education given their children. The Russian

The Mennonite community has always had a strong link to agriculture and have experienced success despite hardships. They are not adverse to starting over if it means the maintenance of their culture.

government interfered very little with subject matter or the language of instruction. Therefore, with the school and church being closely related, the ***Bible*** and ***German*** were integral components of the curriculum. Teachers were often ministers or other members of clergy. The curriculum was developed and implemented by the Church based scripture and was intended as a process of preparation for eventual church membership. School lasted from October to seeding time with as many as seventy students per teacher, and forty being a frequent class size.

Figure 12

The SS Canadian III (1873) was one of many ships that brought the Mennonites to port in Quebec.

The Russian Government observed these conditions until July of 1870, when it was decreed that the agency of Odessa should be abolished. This dismantling of the colonies left the direction of the German schools to be determined by the Russian authorities. The changes included the study of the Russian language as compulsory and that all colonies, in time, were to render a national service and submit to conscription. They had ten years to comply with these new regulations or leave. With this decree, a group of representatives from the Mennonites proceeded to St. Petersburg to bargain for some changes in their favour, but regrettably, the decree could not be altered. When the process of Russification reached the Mennonites, the thought of losing the interconnectedness and control of their German schools was one of the strong contributory factors that led to emigration in the 1870's.

The Low German community shares common values that are steeped in history and tradition. Many life choices are based on what they know from their past. They find security in familiarity.

The Mennonites would find these changes threatening. These changes, plus a growing land shortage and a growing population, prompted some of the Mennonites to look elsewhere. In the 1870's approximately 11,000 Mennonites from Russia moved to Kansas and other parts of the United States of America, while another 7,000 moved to western Canada. Those who chose Canada did so largely because the promise of religious freedom seemed to be strong. The federal government issued an elaborate written promise, exempting them from military service and giving them freedom to operate their own schools. In addition, the government modified the new homestead system so that the Mennonites could settle in blocks, exclusively by themselves, thus creating their own villages and communities.

Western Canada

Figure 13

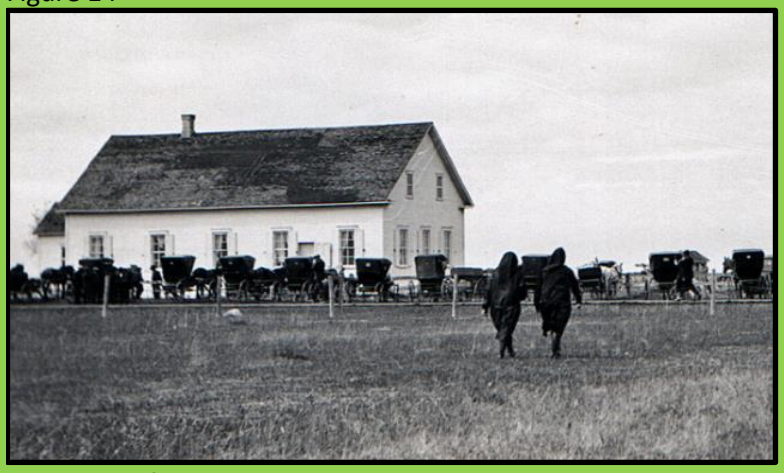
Mennonite Private School at the Mennonite Heritage Village in Steinbach, Manitoba Canada.

When the time came to establish their schools during the early 1890's, Mennonites petitioned the government for schools and received a total of eight schools, four on the west and four on the east side of the Red River Reserve. These schools were established under an old Manitoba law, which recognized separate schools, and consequently there were no restrictions put on the time devoted to religious instruction nor on the time devoted to German language instruction. By

History has taught the Mennonites to be suspicious of governments. Wanting to separate themselves from the world, the Old Colony Mennonites very much adopt an "us" and "them" mentality. The "them" are often referred to as "The English".

1890, the majority of communities had ceased participation in the public school system. The elders of the church, suspicious of legislation, influenced the Mennonite congregation to withdraw their students from the publicly funded and governed schools. The Manitoba government, in order to explain the attendance laws to the Mennonites and if possible, to turn them back to public school, sent Rev. Dr. George Bryce to the Mennonite leaders with Mr. Wm. Hespeler. This visit led to the formation of a voluntary Association for Training of Mennonite Teachers at Gretna, Manitoba. This stabilized the situation for the time being.

Figure 14



By the 1920's Mennonites were well established in colonies and built an effective infrastructure to maintain their language and culture.

During this time, the struggle to develop and maintain their private education system began. For some Mennonites the defence of their fundamental institutions, rather than a reaffirmation of fundamental doctrines or basic lifestyles, had the highest priority where education was concerned. The battle to preserve the private elementary school system reached a critical point by the 1920's. There was little tolerance for non-conformist Mennonites in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, the country was heading towards a strong anti-German sentiment and a suspicion of any language other than English.

The Low German families in our school systems are often referred to as "Mexican Mennonites". This is a term created by non-Mennonites in an effort to identify this group. Although this is a label not created by the community, some refer to themselves as that now without a clear understanding of where the term originated.

Figure 15

The more conservative Mennonites, particularly those from the Old Colony committed to finding a new home in order to preserve their faith, language and culture.

With this strong desire in Manitoba society to promote the English language, the government introduced a bilingual system but the more conservative Mennonites simply continued to operate their own schools, with their **German language**, **religious emphasis**, and **limited curriculum**, just as they had in previous generations. By 1918 the governments in both Manitoba and Saskatchewan had made it compulsory that all children attend public schools where English was the only language of instruction. The more conservative Mennonites did not comply and continued with their own schools. The result was a severe and tragic confrontation with the governments in both provinces. On the surface, the confrontation seemed to be merely the jealous opposition of the English and German languages. However, for the Mennonites, the value systems that clashed were British Military imperium and a pacifist doctrine, which they believed to be espousing the kingdom of God and its righteousness.

For Canada as a whole, this represented the first round in the long battle between Anglo-assimilation and integrationists, and non-Anglo ethnic separation and religious dissent. This clash of values reached its greatest intensity in the struggle between the conservative minded groups on the reserves and the governments of Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Some

Many of our Mennonite students struggle with living in two very different worlds. Most are Canadian citizens or have claim to citizenship through their ties to western Canada a century ago, but also have connections in Mexico and other parts of Latin America.

Mennonites could not surrender educational control over their children and by 1922 were packing for Latin America.

Figure 16

(E DAILY REC(

KITCHENER-WATERLOO, FRIDAY, JUNE 9, 1922.

Mennonites Now Free To Come Into Canada

Order-in-Council passed by Union Government Forbidding Mennonite Immigration Into This Country Has Been Annulled By King Government As Result of Steps Taken By W. D. Euler M. P.

WAS INJUSTICE TO DESIRABLE PEOPLE

MENNONITES PLEASED

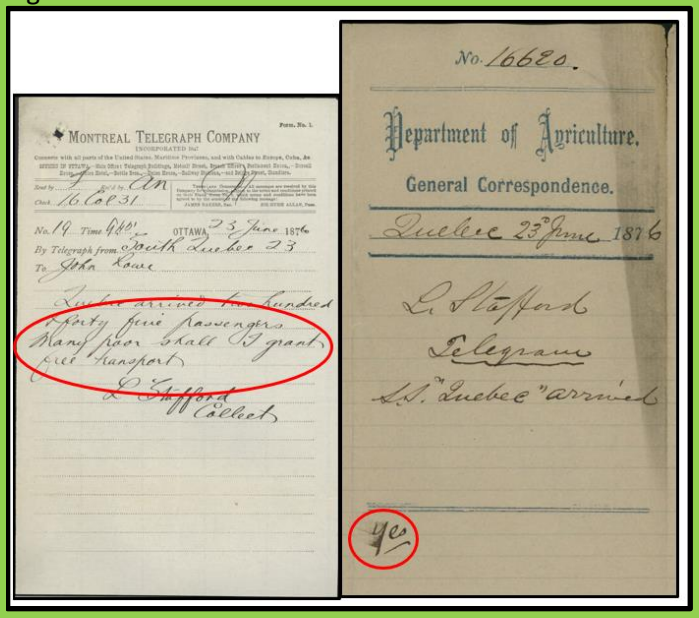
The announcement of the repeal of the order-in-council restricting Mennonite immigration into Canada will be received with a great deal of pleasure by the Mennonite people of North Waterloo, accord-

A strong global anti-German sentiment led to abrupt decisions to control the influx of Mennonites into Canada.

Initially Mennonite leaders appealed to the government for reconsideration of this legislation based on the promises made by the federal government upon their immigration in the 1870's. The response they received was that the federal government under the British North America (BNA) Act had no grounds on which to make educational decisions. Some Mennonites then offered a compromise whereby they would teach English and include other subjects in their curriculum, as long as the schools could remain under the control of the church. However, the government did not honour their request. In 1919 Johan Friesen and Franz Froese articulated their cause and concern before the Canadian Legislature but to no avail. Attempts to preserve their system of education under the 1897 Laurier-Greenway compromise brought some options for the preservation of what they valued in their school systems, until they were required to fly the Union Jack in 1907. The Mennonite leaders viewed the flag as a military symbol and grew even more sceptical of their circumstances. During World War I, the provincial governments of western Canada sought to use schools to inculcate patriotic sentiments and foster Canadian Nationalism. There were restrictions put on "other"

The negative experiences, both lived and historic, heightens the fear and apprehension they have toward education. Their decisions to withdraw from public education are often centered on fear and misunderstanding as much as they are about preserving their culture.

Figure 17



Poverty was something the Mennonites were willing to endure to preserve their faith and culture.

language instruction, there were flag-raisings, the singing of the national anthem and other patriotic songs. These changes were followed by making attendance at accredited schools compulsory. The Reinlaender from the West Reserve and the Chortitzer from the East Reserve were those most opposed to these new requirements and grew increasingly restless.

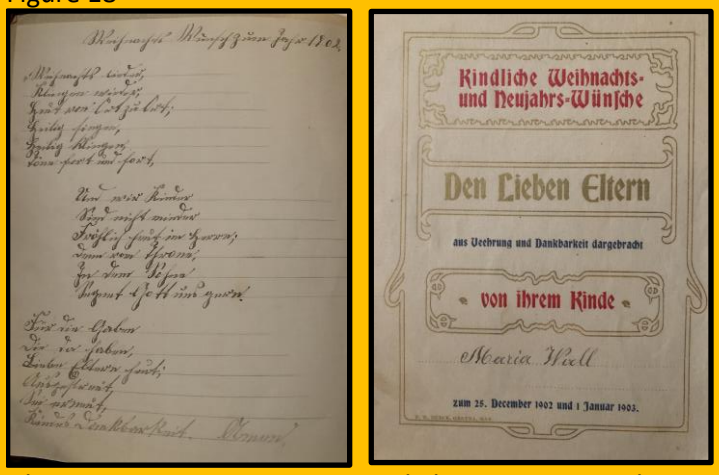
The promises made by the Canadian government found no hope and were short lived in the Mennonite communities. Appeals for reconsideration were made to the highest courts of Manitoba, Canada and London with no avail for the Mennonites. All felt the pressure. Those that did not comply with the new regulations faced judicial action, those that were subjected to the public system suffered culturally. An account of this feeling of oppression is suggested in a quote from a student of that time:

> ***"For the child of my father's and my generation, school could be, and often was a painful place. Everything valued by one's parents, everything that made up one's after-school life, was feared, misunderstood, occasionally ridiculed, and always subtly undermined. Everything associated with the most significant landmarks of human existence, everything***

Many of our Old Colony Mennonite students know little about their history, however as a traditionally oral culture, there is a legacy of apprehension in interacting with the government, especially around educational issues.

that was most sacred, most poignant, most satisfying- all of that was somehow second or third-rate."

Figure 18



The German cursive script and the German Gothic type used for centuries, continues to be used in the Old Colony schools in Mexico.

World War 1 had led to an emergence of violence towards anything German and a social, political climate extremely antagonistic towards the sectarian pacifists. The public school pointed to Anglo-Canadianism rather than German Mennonitism- urbanization rather than rural life, militarism rather than pacifism, ostentation rather than simple lifestyle. It became a question of social integration and ultimate assimilation.

In the years that followed the Manitoba government initiated a strategy to crush the Mennonite resistance. This was done by systematic legislation of districts in unresponsive areas, and placing officials in districts claiming private status, in 1919, this reached the Chortitzer districts. The next to experience the government's wrath were the Reinlaender; by February 1920, ten new school districts were carved into the heart of the stronghold of Mennonite resistance in the West Reserve.

The privilegium and the Federal government had failed them. They had the choice to conform or continue resistance. The Reinlaender, Chortitzer, and some Sommerfelder were determined to counter the

Many of our Low German students and families would have learned the German cursive script and the German Gothic script if they attended a colony school, particularly those that are connected to the Old Colony church. Exposure to the Roman alphabet would be limited to media sources outside of their classroom learning.

Figure 19

Los Alisos welcomed and housed the Mennonites in Nuevo Ideal, Durango Mexico and still dominates the landscape.

government's assault on the Mennonite private schools. Parents refused to submit the names of their children during the annual school census. They boycotted the district schools. They vehemently declined to assist the authorities, and in some instances the latter expropriated school sites when resident landowners refused to sell for the purpose of the new public schools. When the Manitoba government's patience wore thin, fines were levied against those parents who deliberately violated the School Attendance Act. An equally determined offensive marked Saskatchewan's clash with its Rheinlaender dissenters.

During a 1921 Hague trial, sixty Mennonites were fined and one was sentenced to thirty days in Prince Albert Jail. From 1920 to 1925 there had been 5,367 prosecutions based on school attendance in Saskatchewan. The legal basis for the government's and the court's actions in Manitoba and Saskatchewan was the inadequacy of the private school system. Most "farm folk" could not teach English and some even had inadequate High-German. The authorities questioned the curriculum. The daily agenda placed an emphasis on prayers, singing, Bible stories, and reading in the mornings and arithmetic and writing for three hours in the afternoons.

The Low German students in our schools come from a tradition noted for "voting with their feet". Rather than engage in conflict and in some cases even open dialogue, they will simply leave. This can be problematic as they may leave your school without notice and we may never know why.

Figure 20

Determined to maintain their ways of faith and life, delegates sought new horizons.

The Mennonites saw schools as supplemental institutions rather than substitutes for the learning in the home. The position of the Reinlaender and the Chortitzer was neither heard nor understood. The government pressed ahead with their agendas and the people paid the consequences. The unrelenting issue of fines brought the Mennonite resistance to the brink of financial ruin. When the payment of fines was refused, the seizure of property insured the government receiving their dues.

Their choice remained; accept the system or leave the system. Emigration from productive farms was agonizing, but they had done it before (Prussia in 1759 and Russia after the 1870's). Thus began the next series of migration of the Mennonite people. The communities began fundraising to subsidize the expedition on August 4, 1919. A six-man delegation representing the Reinlaender in both provinces was set to depart for the United States and Latin America, they returned November 24 of that same year.

Mennonites do not believe in divorce apart from what is outlined in scripture. They typically have large families. Children help with working for the family and are seen as a blessing from God.

Figure 21

Twenty thousand Mennonites would eventually leave Canada for Latin America.

The conservative Mennonites felt that to yield to the government would mean compromising their religion. The governments argued that the matter had nothing to do with religion, that they just wanted the children to be properly fitted for Canadian citizenship. The conservative Mennonites conceded that their schools might not be equipping their children for life in the larger society, but that was not their intent. They felt that the separate communal, religiously based, agrarian way of life was legitimate, that it was what God had called them to, that their schools were effectively preparing their children for this way of life, that in this way they were also contributing to Canada's well-being, and that governments should permit them to continue in it.

When it became apparent that there would be no compromise, the conservative Mennonites began to look for a new homeland. They inquired about settlement possibilities in Quebec, in the United States, and in several Latin American countries. The imposition of fines and seizure of goods had resulted in situations where families had been stripped and left to starve except for their neighbour's assistance. All avenues had been tried and there seemed no other choice that would appease their consciences; they had to leave.

Old Colony Mennonite communities are governed by the church. Positions of leadership as assigned by the drawing of lots and those positions are typically held for life. A strong community focus is placed on decision making adopting the direction of the majority. Once a decision has been made, all accept the decision.

Latin America

Figure 22

The Old Colony settlement in Durango, Mexico consists of 32 communities. Electricity in the Colony is a relatively recent phenomenon.

The Mexican promises came to fruition when on March 1 of 1922, the first chartered trainload of Reinlaenders left Plum Coulee en route to Mexico. The southward migration led to the establishment of four colonies in Mexico and many more in Central America and South America as far as Paraguay.

This southward migration was not without hardships. Farming technologies had to be adapted to yet another climate, weather and soil conditions. The challenge of interacting with a new government in a new language would put them in positions of vulnerability. These and other variables would again test the Mennonite convictions. Most important to them was the maintenance of the German speaking private schools. Securing the sincerity of these promises allowed the settling to begin, however some of the more contentious issues involving those from outside the colony, fortified their mistrust for government structures and institutions.

In the early 1940's, when much of the world was preoccupied with World War II, conditions for the Mennonites in Mexico were improving. They had learned how to work the land and were getting modest but significant yields from corn and bean crops. Their cheese was well received in Mexican markets and soon became a major source of income for the Mennonites.

While singing and poetry is a staple in Old Colony schools and churches, singing is acapella using the same hymnal used for centuries. Poetry is memorized and recited, often in unison and often for holidays.

Figure 23

The rough and barren landscape was not without its challenges, but the Mennonite leadership was secure in knowing that they had found in Mexico what was lost in Canada.

The Mexican people appreciated the economic contributions of Mennonites and wrote of how these people had made the desert bloom. Still, a number of problems began to surface.

As an agrarian people having large families they soon needed more land. This pressure was felt early in their settlement. They were able to buy some blocks of land elsewhere in Mexico but it was never enough. When they did get new land the titles were not always clear, resulting in disputes with Mexican peasants making claims to Mennonite land and a growing scepticism of government officials. While experiencing a measure of success, the Mennonites made costly errors in not examining the kind of agricultural methods, such as irrigation, that were required. Several new

Low German Mennonites have proven their ability to adapt as means of cultural survival and separation from the world. They are often note for their ingenuity, creativity and strong work ethic.

Figure 24

The Old Colony settlement of approximately 7500 people in Durango Mexico has dozens of one room school houses. There close proximity to each other was needed prior to the use of vehicles.

settlements were abandoned because of these challenges. Also of concern was their system of education which had not changed since its establishment in Russia. Children went to school for six or seven years but teachers received no outside intellectual or academic stimulation. This has manifested itself in challenges of literacy and numeracy outside of the curriculum covered in school. Essentially students begin school in a "Primer" to begin to learn the alphabet, numbers and the grammar structure of High German, though Low German remains the dominant language for day-to-day interactions. The next book of study is the Catechism, which is memorized to be recited upon becoming a member of the church. Following this are the study of the New Testament and subsequently the Bible. Math is typically restricted to addition, subtraction, multiplication, division and some algebra. Interspersed in this curriculum faire are the study, memorization and recitation of poems that support their liturgy. Classes pray as a whole, recite learnings as a whole and sing songs from their hymnal as a whole. Teachers are most often male and lead the children in their learning. The education of the communities are overseen by an elected Deacon who monitors what is happening in schools to ensure the preservation of the system. With an antiquated model of education and a reluctance to change, there have been individuals who wanted and attempted to improve the situation. These individuals were soon labelled as proud, self-seeking and lacking in humility. These criticisms blocked the desired improvements.

In Mexico the school year is determined around planting and harvesting times as well as holidays. Students typically start at the age of 6 and attend until 13 or 14 years of age.

Figure 25

While integration into larger society has increased as means to survival, many of our students struggle with balancing the conflicting views of living in two separate worlds.

There were continuing problems with the restrictions on technology, the most common of which was the rule against having rubber tires on tractors. The idea was that with steel wheels, young people would be less inclined to take pleasure trips to the Mexican towns. In this way the rule would help them remain a separate people. Over the years farmers began to use rubber tires anyway. This led to excommunication from the church which further resulted in the farmers being socially and economically ostracised. The church's hope was that such people would then repent, seek forgiveness and be reconciled with the church. What often happened were feelings of embitterment. These factors and the high inflation rate, low wages and a faltering economy prompted many people to leave Mexico for Canada.

While a century has now passed since the first Mennonite delegates went to Mexico, much has changed, and much has stayed the same. The once predominantly Old Colony demographic has splintered into other Mennonite groups establishing faith communities within the Colony. Although interactions between the different churches within the Colony are

With a strong sense of safety in community established over centuries, our Low German Mennonite students seek familiarity. They are most comfortable when "there are other students like me".

Figure 26

For many Mennonites from Mexico, clinging to the past is becoming increasingly challenging.

for the most part amicable, the sole governance of the Old Colony leadership has lost influence over the entire community through the years. When first established and in the not too distant past, there was no electricity in the most conservative colonies, no indoor plumbing and no transportation other than horse and buggy. This has given way in many areas no having the same infrastructure as their national counterparts. When the last major change occurred in the colony in Nuevo Ideal, Durango; allowing electricity, cell phones and motor vehicles; the church leadership in opposition to these changes left to resettle on other areas of Mexico, Central America and South America.

Since the introduction of technologies previously forbidden into the colonies, an economical stronghold in the community has been established. What were once communities heavily dependent on agriculture, now offer service industry opportunities, restaurants, manufacturing facilities and skilled trades. This growth and development has eroded the once hard line between to colony and interactions with the surrounding communities and indeed Mexico as a whole. With these advancements there has also been an investment in education. Many of the less conservative churches now have their own schools and their children no longer attend the Old Colony school. Those that remain steadfast in their Old Colony faith and traditions have

While history has equipped our LGM students with the ability to survive despite challenges of integration and assimilation, many students struggle with learning gaps and feelings of disengagement. Living in two worlds, but not really wholly connected in either.

Figure 27

Despite systemic barriers, racism and uncertainty, our LGM students thrive when they are understood, valued and respected.

maintained their education system as it has been for generations. This interaction on a national and international scale has made many of the Low German Mennonite community members fluent in many languages and yet continue their focus on the High German for church and school affairs and Low German for daily, less formal interactions.

South Western Ontario

Mennonites from Mexico began moving to south-western Ontario in the late 1950's. They were attracted to Ontario for various reasons. Most of them had claim to Canadian citizenship through either parents or grandparents, and large families could earn a good wage in agriculture while living in seasonal housing. Not unlike all other migrations in the Mennonite history this last one was contingent only on education. In fact, education had little to do with the trek northward. This would eventually result in further confrontations based on education.

This migration pattern has created a complex set of dynamics for the boards of education in south-western Ontario. The boards are faced with the challenge of servicing a people who have historically rejected involvement in the public education arena and who remain in opposition to

There are now more Old Colony Low German Mennonites from Durango in Ontario than there are in Durango.

the curriculum of the Canadian public education system. Much of public education contradicts their religious and community values. The parents are afraid of losing their children to the "world" and hold very little value for the education Canadian society offers. The boards on the other hand have their obligation to adhere to the Education Act which states very clearly the role of boards, schools, principals, teachers and students.

Matters of Faith

Fig 28

Many adobe homes in Nuevo Ideal have given way to newer, more modern building practices.

The Low German Mennonite community is based on Christianity. Their history is one of preserving the separation of Church and state and one marked with the teachings of Menno Simmons and other early reformers. There doctrine and theology reflect the teachings of the New Testament. These teachings are often interpreted literally as well as allegorically. Adult baptism marks one of the many breaks from the Catholic traditions which Menno Simmons started with. Along with adult baptism, the community practices communion in recognition of Christ's sacrifice. Marriage is between one man and one woman in keeping with New Testament teachings and is for life except for the provisions laid out in scripture. Marriage in the Old Colony Low German Mennonite church is reserved for those couples who are both members of the Old Colony church.

The rites of membership come from attending membership, and possibly marriage classes, the recitation of the Catechism responses and the

While many Low German Mennonites from Mexico come to Ontario, Alberta, Manitoba and Saskatchewan are also destinations for many families.

candidate's public confession of faith. Candidates also make amends and confession of transgressions against family and community members prior to membership. Their sense of faith through community is based largely on the teaching and direction of the Church, through the application of scripture, over many areas of day to day life. Deviance from the direction of the Church invoke leadership intervention to ensure compliance and reconciliation through a scripted methodology and support with excommunication being the result for habitually defiant and unrepentant members. Excommunication severs all ties, including economic, between the person and the community. This often results in families unsure of committing to anything, especially education, until it is determined whether or not the church will support their choice.

Fig 29

Mennonites have learned to grow their crops in some formidable conditions with skills learned from centuries of farming.

The faith and religion of the Low German Mennonite community is expressed as a way of life. Obedience to the direction of the Church leadership is expected and aids in the cohesion of the group. It is easily observed that this way of life focuses on simplicity, and a separation from the world in inward and outward means. Interactions with the rest of society is limited to economic perspectives thereby protecting a lifestyle clung to for centuries. The notion of separation from the world is interpreted literally from the Bible, specifically Romans 12:2, "And be ye not conformed to this world" and John 17:16, "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the

In most Low German Mennonite colonies clothes are home made. Bib overalls and shirts for boy and floral print dresses for girls often help identify from which colony they come.

world". Change in perspectives dealing with community comes slowly and is typically based on majority views of members. A slow and determined process of change insures their ability to calculate closely, whether the change will bring them closer to a more worldly value system. From a worldly perspective, their maintenance of an insular community and lifestyle based on community values and direction can often appear as controlling and oppositional to individual rights and freedoms.

Fig 30

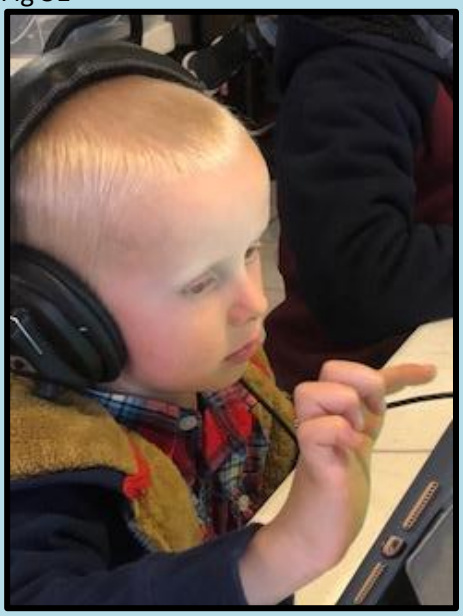
Specific focus on specialized programming is helping to meet the needs of transnational learners.

Dress and deportment are a part of this separation between two worlds. Men and women are expected to dress modestly. In colony life, most men wear bib overalls and typically a "cowboy" hat or ball cap of modest design. Women wear dresses, often with a floral print. Women's head coverings are important to maintaining their distinction as separate people. Young girls may wear a white kerchief and once baptised or married, the kerchief is black. Black or dark dresses are worn for weddings and funerals. This has become a part of the tradition as early Mennonite churches received much persecution. Black was associated with funerals and soldiers would not typically interrupt a funeral service. As well as kerchiefs, women in the Latin American countries will often wear a wide brimmed straw hat adorned with a ribbon. Community and church consensus often control the colour and width of the ribbon.

Sundays are a day of rest and observation of the Sabbath. Church services include songs from the *Gesangbuch* (hymnal) sung in acapella. Men,

Unlike the colonies many of our families left, the Low German Mennonites do not live in close knit communities in Ontario. They are interspersed among the communities in which they live and work.

Fig 31



While once avoided, and still avoided by many, technology is changing how some of our LGM students learn.

selected by other song leaders, lead the songs and they sit at the front of the church facing the congregation for church services, weddings and funerals. These men hold the position for as long as they chose. The Minister is chosen by a vote among members and delivers the sermon. He holds the position for life or as long as he is able to fulfil the duties of office. Prayer is a big part of the service and is led by the Minister with the congregation kneeling with head down at their pew during prescribed times of the service.

The churches attended by most of our Low German Mennonite students are the Old Colony, Sommerfelder, Reinlander, Kleine Gemeinde, Evangelical Mennonite Mission Church (EMMC), and the Evangelical Mennonite Conference (EMC). The most conservative being the Old Colony. Their structures are patriarchal in nature and have been so for centuries. Within the Old Colony, where some our most hard to reach students have connections, governance is achieved through the positions of Bishop, Minister, Deacon, and Song Leaders.

The position of Bishop is a position for life, or as long as he is able to serve, and they see to the ordination of Ministers. They also perform baptisms, weddings, funerals and the Lord's Supper (communion). They are the ultimate authority over area congregations. A Minister in the Old Colony church is a Minister for life, or as long as he has the capacity to serve as well. They assist the Bishop in their duties and preach on Sunday mornings. These are nonpaid lay ministers and they rotate between churches in their region. Through the week, they may provide pastoral care to congregants. The

The Old Colony churches in Ontario are tightly networked and connect with Old Colony churches across North and Latin America.

Deacon's role serves to meet the needs of congregational life outside of Sunday service. They are integral in the preparation of candidates for church membership, keep birth and death records as well as distribute funds for families in need.

The Old Colony and Sommerfelder churches are the most conservative within the context of the Low German speaking Mennonite churches. They worship in High and Low German and have Sunday school for children in Ontario as well as midweek youth groups. The Reinlander and Kleine Gemeinde are not as conservative, but still very traditional in their religion and culture. Their Sunday services are in Low German and may include elements of English. The EMMC and EMC churches are more progressive and would be virtually indistinguishable from non-Mennonites.

Fig 32

Through targeted supports, many of our LGM learners are engaging in learning as we put to practice the essence of equity and inclusivity.

Low German Language (Plautdietsch)*

While the Low German language is not part of the Mennonite faith, it has become a part of the culture. Plautdietsch does play a very significant role in the identification of their culture. The facility of relationship building is strong and establishes similarities between individuals and groups when

Having someone connected to the school that speaks and understands Low German is of great value. This will put parents more at ease and begin the building of trust.

Fig 33

Engaging the entire family is key to helping students feel engaged and supported.

there is a common language. Speaking Low German, or having someone that speaks Low German in the organization will be strong tie to the community. Although Low German is not taught in schools today, and has no firm and fast grammatical rules as a result, it is still spoken by an estimated seven million people worldwide. Naturally, this includes many variations of Low German, but they all originate from the original Low German. The original Low German was once spoken throughout the greatest industrial centers of Europe. Numerous peoples of the Netherlands and Northern Germany still speak a variation of Low German today.

Cultural Sensitivities *

Below are some topics to be cognisant of and sensitive toward when working with Mennonite students. It should be noted that different families may have varying opinions on various topics. Some families may be fine with one topic, but the next may be a big deal. If you are not sure whether or not something is offensive to the Mennonite culture, ASK instead of risking the relationship.

The attachment to public education in Ontario is tenuous for many of our newcomer and transnational families. They may stop coming without or with little notice and often for reasons that aren't communicated.

Remember, parents are just trying to protect their children's innocence and preserve their values. Here is a partial list of topics that require sensitivity.

Fig 34

Mennonite children learn life skills from an early age.

- Dinosaurs
- Witches, vampires, goblins, ghosts, monsters (especially scary-looking ones)
- Halloween
- Hollywood, movies, super heroes, (Sometimes parents disapprove of T.V. and movies in general – ask permission rather than ask forgiveness! Youngsters may be frightened of simple movies because some are not accustomed to watching any movies at all.)
- Magic/Witchcraft
- Evolution
- Pregnancy/nursing babies
- Sexual education
- Atheism, agnosticism, religions worshipping other deities besides God, etc.
- Varying biblical interpretations
- Tattoos and excessive piercings
- Divorce, living common-law with a partner, trans-gender relationships, etc.
- Modesty is important to the Mennonites. Female teachers who refrain from wearing low cut necklines or short skirts are often held in higher regard.

Communications home should be kept simple with adequate explanation. When crafting letters be mindful that Mennonite families are often larger than the typical North American family and are often limited in financial resources.

Mennonite Observed Holidays *

Fig 35

Many of the Low German Mennonite learners in our school systems will be the first in their family to complete secondary school.

Mennonite holidays are mostly special religious days. Do not expect Mennonite students to attend school on these days (especially the more traditional ones). They are important days for church services and family gatherings. Making not of these days and avoiding major school activities is key.

Christmas (December 25): Christmas is traditionally celebrated by attending a morning church service to honour the birth of Christ, and then spending the day with extended family. More traditional Mennonites will set the following 2 days aside for church services and family gatherings as well. Some families are disapproving of Christmas trees and other décor associated to the mainstream celebration of Christmas, seeing such things as a pagan survival which has no place among Christians. In very traditional homes, large bowls will be set up by the children on Christmas eve, in which parents place gifts for their children to enjoy the next morning. Some families will take advantage of the days off from work and school and take this time to travel to see family in Mexico or other areas of North and South America.

Epiphany (January 6): On this day more traditional Mennonites have morning church services commemorating the three wise men who came to visit Jesus. The day is often spent visiting with family and friends.

The observation of religious holidays is integral to the Mennonites to maintaining a sense of family and community as well as acts of worship.

Good Friday and Easter: Church services are held on Good Friday and Easter Sunday at all Mennonite churches. Good Friday is traditionally set apart as a day on which to reflect the death of Christ. Thus, many traditional families spend the day at home in quiet meditation of the cost of Salvation and Jesus' willingness to die on the cross for mankind. Easter Sunday, and for some, the following 2 days as well, as spent visiting family. Some families will have Easter egg hunts and goodie bags for their children. As with Christmas, some families will welcome mainstream ideas connected to Easter, such as the Easter bunny, whereas others will not.

Fig 36

Beyond other contributions, Mennonites in Latin America have become known for their dairy and cheese production.

Ascension Day (the 6th Thursday after Easter): This day is set apart with a church service in the morning to honour the ascension of Jesus into heaven after He had completed His work on earth.

Pentecost (the 7th Sunday after Easter): Pentecost is celebrated with a morning church service commemorating the gift of the Holy Spirit to Christians. Many Mennonites have family gatherings in the afternoon on this day.

Any occasions for students to congregate with family and other members of their community will put apprehensions at ease.

A Welcoming Plan for Low German Students **

Welcoming students and their families takes some preparation. The following is a general strategy that can be implemented over time and adapted to your school's specific circumstances, resources and needs.

Fig 37

Mennonite children affirm their value in community by often playing with children with whom they are familiar.

Within the whole school:

Plan ahead: If you know a family is coming, plan an interpreter.

Student volunteers: Establish a team of Low German speaking student volunteers who take new students on a tour of the school (highlighting washrooms and other important locations).

Welcome book: Provide new students with a visual welcome book to the school. Include photos of the school with simple labels; including student's classroom, photos of all teachers who will be interacting with this student, office, gym etc. with simple identifying sentences under each picture. Encourage the student to take this booklet home and share with the family.

Welcome Buddies: Create a Welcoming Buddy group of 5 students. Assign each student to one day per week to support the new student. This

Planning for students being absent in advance of holidays will help reduce gaps. Not planning assessments on these dates would avoid unnecessary tension.

buddy group should be given strategies to engage the student outside the classroom in play, in the school yard, as well as in the classroom with books.

Bus Buddies: Assign a bus buddy for the newcomer's first few weeks of school to help ensure the student gets to the bus on time.

Announcements: Make an announcement welcoming the student to your school.

Student interviews: If the school has student reporters, have them interview the newcomer (and all other newcomers) and prepare a brief report to let the student body get to know the person.

Inform all staff: Use the school email to inform all staff about the newcomer. This ensures the lunchroom and bus duty teachers are aware of the student and their level of English.

Fig 38

Many transnational families struggle with which parts of their past to cling to and which to leave to meet their changing needs.

Unstructured times: If socializing seems difficult for the student, structure one day a week where the student plays board games with others his age during unstructured times (recess, lunch) and/or assign one or two playground buddies.

Share their abilities: As the student adjusts to the school, continue to increase the Low German student's visibility in the school by sharing their writing and artwork in school publications and in hallway displays and encouraging their involvement in leadership positions (student volunteers, the Welcoming Buddy group and other opportunities). Meet with parents and, when applicable, highlight the above mentioned successes.

The Old Colony, both church and community, have self identified as a group that has resisted modernization and have values rooted in their past.

Within the classroom

Fig 39

Poverty is often the driving force in the decisions made to leave the colony.

Prepare ahead: Immediately alert the receiving classroom teachers and custodian so that a desk learning space can be prepared for the newcomer as there is nothing more overwhelming then arriving in the new class and having to stand in front of the class for long periods of time while a teacher scrambles to find a desk. Remember that for many Low German students from Latin America, placement in the classroom is indicative of age and ability. It may be best to initially pick a neutral, middle space.

Class placement: Where possible, place students in classes with other Low German speaking students.

Translation: Immediately give the classroom teacher a list of Low German interpreter contacts and immediately consult with ESL personnel to arrange a home visit or a parental visit to the school with the interpreter present. (Link: checklist initial classroom observations-1)

Specialized literacy programs: Establish a specialized literacy program for Low German speaking students through ESL and intervention plans.

Many of our LGM parents may have had some experience in Ontario's public education system. For marginalized groups in our buildings whose power has been compromised by lived experiences, collective memory can often be more salient than efforts to ensure sae and secure learning environments.

Visual timetables: Prepare a visual timetable for the student with pictures representing subjects. In consultation with the ESL teacher, place alternate activities in duotangs to correspond to subject areas with the corresponding subject visual on the duotang. This helps establish faster student independence. Peer buddies can help students get started/stay engaged. Try not to over-simplify concepts while still assisting to overcome language barriers.

Fig 40

Transnational families may migrate between countries for several years.

Share their expertise: Help classmates be aware of the new student's value in the class by identifying something the new student can teach the class (a craft, food preparation, singing, hands on tasks etc), or share a unique experience, making the student an expert in something. Encourage discussion/exercises that demonstrate the similar and different skills each student has, highlighting how much more we are all alike than different. Take opportunities to use the newcomer's experiences and/or skills as talking points. Engage the class in activities that help develop empathy towards the newcomer's experience.

Be flexible: Include the student as much as possible, adding visuals to lessons, including hands on activities, and engage in parallel programming when regular goals are unachievable. Adjust assessments so that the pressure of written curriculum is alleviated. Helpful resources include a computer and books on tape or CDs. Use real-life items and situations to

The Old Colony Mennonites are community minded and focussed. There is an inherent avoidance of activities and attitudes that highlight the individual.

explain concepts. Remember that Low German speaking children often excel at group work. Capitalize on this!

Working with Parents

Fig 41

Abandoned homes permeate the landscape as indication of the pursuit of a better life.

Homework: Before sending any homework home, explain to the parents why it is important. The students should be able to work at this independently. It should not require new learning/teachings. If the parent discourages homework, respect this and use other options such as creating a homework club at school, partnering the student with others to complete daily reading, modifying assignments or have students complete homework with ESL teachers.

Get to know the parents: Many Low German speaking parents will feel intimidated by the Canadian school system if they have not been educated in it. It is important to help them feel valued and to provide opportunities for involvement. The best way to begin this process is to meet with them along with a translator. Invite them to school or request a home visit to introduce yourself. When you are able to have a translator present, the parents will benefit from knowing their name beforehand as it may provide a clue that this person will know their language and culture.

Many of the ethnic or cultural traits of the Old Colony Mennonites have become attached to their religious identity.

Other Suggestions:

a) Consider planning regular get-togethers that have limited agenda and encourage parents to ask questions.

b) Host regular coffee hours with a limited agenda encouraging parents to ask questions.

c) Encourage students to invite their parents to come to visit class.

d) Invite families to share recipes, photos, experiences (connect to seasonal/themed events at school)

e) Host afternoon sessions with high school students and other members of the Low German community who have continued on in school in various formats

f) Try to get parents to volunteer (i.e. in breakfast program)

g) Provide child care for parent and/or family events

Fig 42

Establishing trust through the provision of safe and healthy learning environments is paramount when working with Low German speaking Mennonites.

English Language Learners **

- Be aware of, and allow for the Acculturation process
- Newcomers move through predictable stages when adjusting to new cultures.
- Negative emotions and attitudes may be associated with certain acculturation stages, in particular “culture shock”.

Accept the “Silent” Period

- It is typical for newcomers to not be orally expressive for several months. The time period depends on the ELLs learning style and comfort level.
- During this time, they are assimilating language internally and are making significant gains in receptive skills (learning vocabulary, syntax and concepts without verbal expression).

Enhance Positive Intercultural Attitudes

- Language is learned best when the learner feels safe and accepted.
- ELLs become ‘engaged’ in the learning process when they feel it is safe to become emotionally and socially ‘connected’ to the classroom and school community.
- Create an inclusive classroom by reflecting and valuing the cultures and first languages of all class members; this may include displays, visuals and learning materials.

Be Realistic in your Expectations

- It takes 5 to 7 years to learn a second language.
- It will take 1 to 1.5 years for the ELL to move through the first of four stages.
- It is not appropriate for newcomers to be expected to perform at grade level expectations during stage one and two.
- Even though it is ideal for the ELL be fully immersed in an alternate program at his/her level, it is neither realistic nor expected in the

classroom environment.

Plan Learning Experiences that are within the Comprehensible' Range for the Newcomer

- Newcomers require modified plans based on the goals indicated in stage one.
- During the stage one phase, expectations are based on 'functional language' instead of 'academic skills' and on basic interpersonal communication skills instead of cognitive / academic language development.
- As the student becomes more proficient in English a greater emphasis is placed on accommodating the ELL and less on modifying programs.
- As newcomers become more proficient in English, it becomes more appropriate to gradually integrate curriculum content-based expectations.

Use a Communicative Approach

- Emphasize meaning and fluency before accuracy.
- Aim to communicate and understand real messages from the beginning.
- Create experiences that are meaningful and purposeful while focusing on oral communication and functional language.
- Accept errors and inter-language forms as a natural part of learning.
- Expose the ELL to target language structures and involve him/her in activities that require these to be used.

Create Efficient Learning Environment that is Manageable for the Teacher

- Students can be effective teachers in a classroom: Enlist the assistance of classmates.
- Classmates provide authentic and meaningful English language models for the newcomer.
- Classmates provide real opportunities for basic interpersonal communication skills (stage one and two ELL expectations).
- Organize a Peer coaching system.

Summary

While we see many students from the LGM community thrive in our education systems and in our communities, we also see many that struggle. Lived and shared experiences have shaped how many in the LGM community view and value education. How we interact with them will either validate or nullify their preconceived notions about who we are and what we do in public education. When children do not feel safe, valued and accepted, they are not in a place to learn. Though many of these students may come from an education experience based on antiquated teaching methods, these methods do not align with how we know learning works best. Take the time to challenge your own bias and to understand your student community. They will deeply appreciate your efforts.

NOTES

Bibliography

Alberta Teachers' Association: Guide for Teachers New to Working With Low German Speaking Mennonite Students and Communities. Edmonton: Alberta Teachers' Association, 2019

Epp, Frank, H. Mennonites in Canada 1920-1940. Toronto: MacMillan of Canada, 1982.

Epp, Frank, H. Mennonites of Canada, 1786-1920. The History of a Separate People. Toronto: MacMillan of Canada, 1975.

Friesen, John, W. People, Culture and Learning. Calgary: Detselig Enterprises Limited, 1977.

Friesen, I.I. The Mennonites of Western Canada with Special Reference to Education. Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan, 1934.

Friesen, P.M. The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia. Winnipeg, Man.:Christian Press, 1978.

Hiebert, Clarence. Brothers in Deed to Brothers in Need. Newton, Kansas.: Faith and Life Press, 1974.

Janzen, William. The Mennonites from Mexico in Ontario. Notes for a video tape by William Janzen, 1988.

Kraybill, Donald. Ethnic Education: The Impact of Mennonite Schooling. San Francisco: Robert D. Reed and Adam S. Eterovich, 1977.

Lohrenz, Gerhard. The Mennonites From Western Canada. Steinbach Man.: Derksen Printers Ltd., 1974.

Manitoba Archives, ME-14 C45.

Mock, Karen, R. and Masemann, Vandra, L. Implementing Race and Ethnocultural Equity Policy in Ontario School Boards. Toronto: Ministry of Education, 1990.

Schroeder, William. Huebert, Helmut. Mennonite Historical Atlas. Winnipeg, Man.: Springfield Publishers, 1990.

Smith, Henry, C. Smith's Story of the Mennonites. Newton, Kansas.: Faith and Life Press. 5th Ed., 1981.

Toews, John, B. Czars, Soviets & Mennonites. Newton, Kansas.: Faith and Life Press, 1982.
Warkentin, Karen That is How We Have Always Done It. Winnipeg, Manitoba, University of Winnipeg, 2010.

Figure Credits

Cover: "Exodus" by Abe Wall
Fig 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44: Abe Wall
Fig 9: https://christianity.redzambala.com/christianity/anabaptist/menno-simons-biography.html
Fig 10: https://www.biography.com/news/catherine-the-great-lovers
Fig 11: http://www.daveloewen.com/russia_history.html
Fig 12: http://www.norwayheritage.com/p_ship.asp?sh=canf3
Fig 13:
http://www.canada-photos.com/picture/blumenhof-private-mennonite-school-steinbach-manitoba-4280.htm
Fig 14:
https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/the-carillon/local/Mennonite-migration-of-1919-remembered-511125691.html
Fig 15: Abe Wall
Fig 16: https://steinbachonline.com/local/mennonites-were-banned-from-coming-to-canada-from-1919-1921
Fig 17: http://darethehair.net/genealogy.html

*Taken from:
http://mennoniteeducation.weebly.com
** Taken from:
http://mcco.ca/system/files/1_NEW/IMAGES/A%20strategic%20plan%20for%20welcoming%20Low%20German%20Students%20into%20your%20school.pdf