OLD ORDER AMISH PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

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The Old Order Amish in the societal arena provides a philosophy of education which is unique and worthy of study. They tend to have a minimal of problems when making comparisons with other sub cultures in society. Drug abuse, pregnancy among unwed mothers, crime, alcoholism, thievery, and other forms of anti-social behavior appear to be at a very low level. This is not to say it is a utopia, since any culture has problems to solve. Approximately, one fourth of their young people tend to leave the Old Order Amish community. A more recent major problem is to determine a vocation other than farming which traditionally has been a mainstay among the Old Order Amish (OOA). Low farm prices for agricultural crops and livestock has forced them to readjust life styles to new jobs and vocations without sacrificing core values such as a strong family life style whereby the mother and father together with their children are closely bonded in working together as a unit until the offspring is old enough to secure work independently.

Old Order Amish Education

To meet OOA goals with an eighth grade education, Amish students are very diligent in school work. In rural Bloomfield, Iowa there are eight one room wooden school buildings. Seven of these have two teachers in each school. The teachers are usually Amish women who also have completed eight years of schooling with eight months of education being considered as one school year for OOA children. Periodically, an Amish young man will serve as a teacher. A handicapped Amish male has been a teacher in rural Bloomfield, Iowa for many years. Amish teachers rarely raise their voices at misbehavior in the classroom. They may be copying assignments for students on the chalkboard for five to ten minutes and yet learners continue to study rather continuously. This has been the case even when the teacher does not look back to observe pupils doing seat work.

What do they study?

Young children use the Rod and Staff Reading series, published at Covington, Kentucky. These contain Biblical stories such as incidents in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, patriarchs in the book of Genesis (Old Testament). Along with the content, phonics, context clues, and syllabication are taught. Comprehension skills such as reading for facts, directions, and for a sequence of ideas are stressed.

Students draw and color art work which is generally related to Biblical subject matter. For example, the author has art work completed by Amish children dealing with “A city set on a hill cannot be hid” (Matthew 5, New Testament). Religious verses appear on the classroom walls such as, “God is not mocked, what so ever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.” Stu-
dents comprehend these stories well since in their church services, they have also heard numerous times the deeds and acts of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob from the pulpit. Seventh and eighth grade pupils read selections from a text containing moral admonitions and beliefs. Thus, selected writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson (See Whicher, 1957) harmonize well with OOA thinking such as in the following statements:

* lean upon thyself. Handwork and thrift are definitely two adhered to values. OOA do not pay into social security, but even more important is not to receive any aid from this source. Social security is impersonal whereas when OOA assist each other in times of need, they know each other intimately.

* trust thyself. The Old Order Amish are strong believers in God, but at the same time, they do accept individual accountability in the here and now, as well as for the hereafter.

* accept the place where divine Providence has placed you. OOA are not to question the reasons for nor the circumstances of selected events. Thus, for example, if a badly needed family member dies such as a mother, father, brother, or sister, God is not to be questioned as to the motive. God is in charge and knows best, according to Amish philosophy.

* self reliance is a key item in Emerson's and OOA thinking.

* non-conformity is important to the OOA in not accepting societal values. Emerson stressed nonconformity as a sign of being a mature person (Ediger, 1996). Old Order Amish conform strictly in terms of dress for their members, but are unique in this area when compared to others in society.

Critical and creative thinking as well as problem solving is not emphasized in school. In everyday farm work Amish farmers do think critically in assessing what to do in farming to increase crop and livestock yields on the farm. New approaches (creative thinking) are also in evidence in farming appreciations. There are a plethora of problems to be solved when farm machinery breaks down. Since farm machinery is old, breakdowns are somewhat common. New spare parts are not available to be purchased. A local blacksmith may then make parts for an implement which has broken down. Modernism is frowned upon if new farm machines were to be purchased. However, non-Amish farmers are hired to cut farm crops such as wheat, corn, and soybeans. Tradition is prized highly and yet working outside the farm setting has made for new ways of perception.

Arithmetic is taught with the use of a basal textbook. Methods of teaching arithmetic involve following the text step by step in showing pupils learnings in numeracy. Teachers' manuals are not used here. Nor are concrete markers used. Abstract learnings and the visuals contained in the arithmetic textbook, are emphasized in teaching. Diligent Amish children do help in making for more optimal achievement. For completed work, pupils exchange papers for checking answers while the teacher reads the correct answers. Arithmetic has strong utilitarian functions in society (Hostettler, 1980).

A commercial textbook is used to teach the language arts.
The mechanics of written work receive careful attention such as proper use of capital letters, indentation of paragraphs, use of quotation marks, as well as commas and end punctuation marks. Letter writing receives much emphasis since it has practical values in Amish society (Ediger, 1986).

Science is learned from practical farm situations. These learnings include sheet and gully soil erosion, floods, hail, terracing of fields, soil conservation, commercial and animal fertilizers, tornados, cyclones, wind velocity, among others (Ediger, 2003).

The Old Order Amish Defined

There are selected generalizations which may be developed pertaining to the OOA. They live in a community of people with similar/same values, surrounded by others who are outside the fold but may have goals which are also rural in nature. Thus, the Amish have a long history of being a traditional culture. This separates them from others in society. And yet, modernization encroaches upon the Amish. Highways, shopping malls, rural establishes businesses, and new houses built for non Amish, make it so that separation from the world is increasingly difficult.

Non-farm types of work tends to integrate Amish with secular society. Thus, the following situations become increasingly common for the Amish:
* men working on construction crews in small cities. The crew may be headed by a member of the Old Order Amish faith.
* men working in a factory or small store in a rural setting.
* men being promoted in business to managerial positions with an increasingly high salary, not typical of traditional Amish life styles. This has made a distinction between the Factory Amish versus the Farming Amish.
* young women working at restaurants as waitresses.

Meanwhile, the following remain stable situations in Old Order Amish societies:
* separate parochial schools for Amish children. There are Amish children, however, in selected rural areas who attend school with others having similar values, such as at the Yoder, Kansas Charter School, Yoder, Kansas.
* clothing patterns for Amish women/girls and for men/boys. Men and boys wear blue denim trousers and accompanying suspenders together with a dark colored shirt. Straw hats are worn when doing farm work during the warm months. Amish women and girls wear long dresses which go toward the ankles and the sleeves go down to the wrists. All dresses have a very high neck line. Prayer caps are always worn. The dresses are made follow a common pattern. All Amish clothing has plain colors with no stripes and no checks. Blue, brown, dark purple, and black are common acceptable colors.
* Pennsylvania Dutch spoken at home whereas German is the language of the church.
* horses and carriages used for transporting people locally whereas hired cars used for distant places such as weddings, family reunions, and funerals. Bus and train
service are also used for distant visitations.
* eighth grade terminal education for Amish children in one room school houses. Outdoor privies are the general rule, but there are exceptions.
* rural living is an ideal, not urban nor suburban life styles.
* the work ethic is strong. But increasingly, there are Amish who take vacations to such places as the Rockies in Colorado. More leisure time is wanted by some in order to go fishing and ice skating (Ediger, 1997).
* local time off from work is stressed during weddings, Christmas, Easter holidays, Sundays, and funerals.
* local churches decide upon specific rules such as should carriages have hard rubber or metal enclosures with wooden spokes on carriages.
* church services are held bi-weekly in an Amish home or barn. A fellowship meal for all members follows the service.
* on alternative Sundays, Amish have a religious service in each home. In the afternoon, Amish visitations to homes is common. Cohesion in the family and in the community is emphasized strongly.
* young men of draft age serving as conscientious objectors rather than in the military.
* the Bible being interpreted literally with no human reasoning.

References


