

# **“You’re never going to learn anything”<sup>1</sup>: Low German Mennonite Schooling in Canada**

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Sometimes I feel sad, I wish I could do my kids the same way my parents did me [chuckle].... Because I learned more respect for my parents than my, my children do for, for us.... The longer we stay here the more they would be, uh, like a Canadian.... For me it would be better [laughing] to do them the old way....<sup>2</sup>

Maria Friesen, a Low German Mennonite (LGM) immigrant to Winkler, Manitoba from Chihuahua, Mexico, and mother of seven, noted with regret that her children were being exposed through public schooling to a world that was drastically different than the one in which she had been raised. The family moved to Canada for economic reasons and has travelled back and forth many times throughout their eight-year foray into Canadian life—often multiple times a year, each time with an uncertainty of where they belonged or how long they would stay. Maria noted: ‘I don’t know if we think that we would stay here, but we came here until we have some...money that we could live’.

Maria spoke wistfully about her own school experience in the Old Colony village school in Mexico, learning to read and write the German Gothic script so she could read the Bible, singing hymns

in the Old Colony *langwiese* style and of being the fastest girl on the schoolyard.

I...had my school in Mexico...until eleven or twelve.... Boys have to go to twelve and the girls until eleven.... We learned 'The writing' [Gothic script].... Um, I would say, I like that I was able to learn these things. I am able to show my children the way, how we can all be saved someday.... And then we learned at home, from Mom, sewing, baking, and cooking...milking cows and everything.

She expressed sadness that her own children had such a different school experience from her own, but she conceded that she would allow them to decide if they wanted to continue with high school.

Her ambivalence towards her children's participation in school seemed to stem partly from what they were learning and partly from they were not learning—learning too many worldly things—like sex ed—('they don't have to be smart so young' she said—referring to this topic) and too little about their own language, faith, and management of the domestic sphere. She complained that her daughters in particular had little time for learning skills that they needed to thrive as Old Colony wives and mothers—sewing, dishes, helping with the younger children. School was a distraction from real learning.

Seventeen year-old Sara, Maria's oldest child and an honour roll student, is one of the very few LGM young people who has continued to high school. For this, she has faced considerable opposition from family and friends, from those who feared Sara was endangering herself by pursuing her education. She recounted common accusations:

Like, why are you just going to- why are you going to school? Like, you're never going to learn anything. You're never going know how to do anything. You're, like- stuff like that... that you need to know. Like, sewing and [cooking] and stuff.... You're not learning tools how to survive, like, make your own things, right? Like...you're just learning stuff, like, that comes out of the world or something, you know?

The Friesen parents, like many LGM parents, view the Canadian school experience as simply part of the necessary compromises of life in Canada. Like most LGM families, the Friesen children attend public school, that is, until Grade Eight. The practical realities of life shape the schooling experience at least as much as any philosophical commitments to a particular education system; even though the Friesens, like many LGM parents, would prefer to send their children to a local Old Colony of LGM private school or

homeschool them in order to protect them from the secularizing influences of public schooling, financial and logistical constraints prohibit the latter options.

Through the portrait of this family, I provide evidence of the ways in which the family's pattern of transnational migration shape understandings and aspirations about schooling. The triangulation of interviews within the nexus of a family unit illustrates the extent of ambivalence extant in each family, as individuals struggle to assert their own identity while simultaneously grappling with the cultural and religious expectations of their closest kin. Through the portrait of this family, I examine how beliefs about school vary between family members and reveal the tensions between competing aspirations, particularly between Maria, the mother, and Sara, her 17 year-old daughter. For Low German Mennonites, the purpose of schooling has historically served to reinforce the boundaries of the community—linguistic, theological, and epistemological. However, the public school experience in Canada is characterized by the expansion of a child's intellectual horizons, what one interviewee described as 'an opening and a broadening' (personal communication, 8 May, 2014).

In this article I consider the relationship between Low German Mennonite (LGM) immigrants to Canada and the public school system, and I do this through an ethnographic portrait of a single family, the Friesens, a highly transnational family who migrated frequently between the prairie province of Manitoba and the Manitoba Colony in Chihuahua, Mexico. This portrait of a family highlights the competing aspirations that exist within most LGM families who 'return' to Canada. This one family highlights issues that affect most returning LGM families, whether they come from Mexico, Bolivia, Paraguay or elsewhere. These families must grapple with shifting gender roles, beliefs about the purposes of education, and a changing vocational, linguistic, and epistemological landscape. As they move back and forth between Canada and Mexico, the children move in and out of schools and parents and children alike must navigate a foreign system with often contradictory values and different mores of parental and student engagement, choosing which aspects of Canadian life to embrace and which to eschew.

This paper is based on a chapter of my thesis that I recently completed at the University of Oxford in the department of Education and which focused on the schooling practices of Low German Mennonites in southern Manitoba and northern Mexico. It is based on fieldwork that I conducted between December of 2013 and January of 2016, which included visits to several schools, and 27



interviews, which were conducted with students, parents of students, teachers, administrators, and school support staff. Though the content of my broader research agenda focuses explicitly on issues of Low German Mennonite (LGM) schooling in both Canada and Mexico, the focus of this particular paper is on the Canadian context and the beliefs about schooling held by those Mennonites from Mexico who have immigrated to the predominantly Mennonite region of Southern Manitoba.

In the 1920s, conflict over schooling prompted the exodus of nearly 8,000 Mennonites from the Canadian prairie provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan to Mexico and Paraguay; this is the largest voluntary exodus of a single people group in Canadian history (Janzen, 1990; Ens, 1994; Loewen, 2013). Although several different Mennonite churches participated in the migration: Sommerfelder, Bergthaler, and Kleine Gemeinde, the largest group were the Altkolonier (then known as Reinlaender), or Old Colony Mennonites, who derived their name from the fact that they hailed from the original colony of settlement in Russia, the Chortitza Colony, when the Mennonites initially migrated there from Prussia at the turn of the eighteenth century (Urry, 1989). These Mennonites immigrated to Manitoba in the 1870s after having negotiated a *Privilegium*, or charter of freedoms with the federal government through Agriculture Minister John Lowe, guaranteeing them, among other things, exemption from military service and the freedom to conduct their schools without government interference (Ens, 1994). It is estimated that since the initial migration to Mexico, approximately 80,000 descendants of the Old Colony emigrants have subsequently returned to Canada, where tensions over schooling have persisted (Loewen, 2013). The tensions—then, as now—are rooted in a fundamentally different understanding of the purposes of education, and disagreements about who should have the right to determine the form and content of a child's education—the church and family, or the state (Sneath, 2017).

For Low German Mennonites, schooling has historically served as the primary locus through which their language, faith, and worldview have been transmitted and these goals have often conflicted directly with concepts of schooling as a vehicle through which to promote autonomy, social mobility and loyalty to the state. And while the Canadian government initially promised the Mennonites freedom to conduct their schools as they saw fit—a fact that was neglected was that in Canada education is regulated provincially, not federally; between 1890 and 1920 the provincial governments of Manitoba and Saskatchewan introduced legislation that increasingly curtailed the religious and linguistic freedoms



enjoyed by the Mennonites in their schools (Francis, 1955; Janzen, 1990; Ens, 1994).

The situation deteriorated to such an extent that in the 1920s a third of the Mennonites from Manitoba emigrated en masse to Mexico, where they were promised by President Álvaro Obregón the right to exercise their religious freedom in their schools—a promise which has been largely kept, other than a brief hiatus in 1935 (Schmiedehaus, 1982; Harder & Ens, 2006).<sup>3</sup> Mennonite village schools in Mexico are conducted in a manner that has changed little since the Mennonites were in Prussia in the seventeenth century. Schoolhouses are single-room, taught by a man from the community, children attend for six to seven years, and the focus of the curriculum is largely religious with the Bible and catechism serving as the primary texts. The language of instruction is High German, a language reserved for school and church. Low German, largely considered to be an oral dialect, comprises the language of home and commerce.

My interest in this community and in their experiences with education arose from a personal connection; my grandfather, Jacob I. Dyck participated in the 1922 migration to Mexico and his father, Isaak F. Dyck, was one of the first schoolteachers in Mexico. My grandfather, however, left the community as an adolescent, and thus, my connection to the community was more symbolic than real. I was familiar with their schooling practices and curious about how their frequent transnational migrations shaped their schooling experiences in each respective country. In the 1950s my grandfather made the return migration to Manitoba, marrying a non-Mennonite and settling eventually in Winnipeg.

Unlike the mass migrations of the 1920s that took the Mennonites to Mexico, migrations back to Canada have been undertaken by single nuclear families, occasionally as permanent moves but often as frequent transmigrations, with families trickling back and forth almost from the start. Certainly, in the earliest years, those who returned to Canada were regarded as defectors (Loewen, 2013), but today transnational travel, either in the form of seasonal or permanent migrations is a common and accepted practice (Janzen, 2004; Loewen, 2013). In Mexico, the purpose of LGM schooling in all of its manifestations is clear—to prepare students to take their place within the community (Hedges, 1996). Because the purpose of education in Mexico is collectively oriented, when arriving in Canada, parents and children must reimagine the purpose of schooling with a more individualized explanation—is it to increase upward mobility, learn useful skills for life and a future

vocation, to nurture Christian values, or to aid assimilation into Canadian society?

Just as migrations to Canada tend to be undertaken by individual families seeking economic opportunity, similarly the school responses are made individually, without the approval of ministers or blessing of the *Jemeent*. School decisions are often indicative of the extent to which the family embraces or resists the host culture, and, as Good Gingrich (2013) argues, represent one part of a conundrum faced by all immigrant families. Those who have come to Canada find themselves in the difficult position of trying to protect and preserve the very culture that they have left behind—within a new and often hostile context.

Interviewees included those who had recently arrived in Canada within the past several months to those who had made the trek in the 1970s. Interestingly, the motivation for immigrating to Canada, or ‘returning’, remained constant over time. The primary motivating factor was overwhelmingly economic, a fact corroborated both by the Friesen family and others working in the field (Castro, 2004; Janzen, 2004; Good Gingrich, 2016). Other motives include the desire to be closer to relatives, improved educational opportunities for one’s children, or to take advantage of Canada’s strong social safety network (Good Gingrich, 2016). Overwhelmingly, economic factors influence the move. Usually families come seeking employment for the men in the manufacturing, agriculture, or transportation sectors (Castro, 2004; Good Gingrich, 2013). Only for a select few did education factor prominently into decisions to immigrate—usually when the children in the family had learning disabilities. Typically, sorting out schooling was a decision made after arriving in Canada.

Initially, when families arrived in the 1970s and 1980s, the options were limited to public schooling or attendance at Mennonite Collegiate Institute, located in the town of Gretna. Over time, options available to returning LGM families in the Winkler region increased to include: government-funded public school, accredited and unaccredited independent schools, and homeschooling. The attitudes towards school fall across a spectrum, with experiences ranging from those who are strongly supportive of the Canadian school system and encourage their children to pursue further education or have themselves pursued further education to those who avoid school altogether, even if it means contravening the law.

For those who embrace publicly funded schooling for themselves or their children, it is sometimes accompanied by a belief that the Canadian schools offer their children a superior education to what was available in Mexico, and that the opportunities created



by a Canadian school experience are to be embraced, not avoided. Often, however, both parents and children display ambivalence towards schooling in Canada, participating in the system because of its expedience while recognizing that increased intellectual capital is often accompanied by a movement away from the culture and traditions of home. One incentive enrolling one's children in school soon after arrival in Canada—a reason cited a number of times by teachers and service workers—was that in order to collect family allowance support from the government, children needed to be registered for school (Annie Wall, personal correspondence, 10 February, 2014). Apparently, child benefits were tied to school registration and attendance, which served as a bureaucratic carrot to entice families to send their children to school. Most LGM parents tend not to actively participate in the schooling process, partly because of language barriers, but also because there is little cultural precedent for engagement; historically, parents paid tuition and attended annual school concerts, but there was no daily practice of participation, through homework, report cards and parent teacher meetings ubiquitous in Canadian schools. Finally, there are those who avoid the Canadian public school system altogether and who seek to provide a school experience for their children which is more similar to the one in Mexico, either through home schooling, private schooling, or no official schooling. Based on interviewee responses, non-attendance in secondary schooling was the norm in the 1970s and 1980s and only recently is it starting to become more acceptable for students to continue their schooling, particularly since the school division introduced an alternative high school program for *Dietsche* students in the early 2000s.

It is difficult to speculate about what percentage of LGM immigrants would fit into each particular category, although based on enrollment statistics at the secondary school level in Winkler, it is fair to say that very few LGM students pursue schooling beyond Grade 8 (typically age 13 or 14), so the majority of families would fit into the latter two groups. As Saunders-Currie (2017) notes, the families simply disappear. In 2013, the official school leaving age was raised to 18, from 16 (*Manitoba Schools Act*), although this change in law does not appear to have had a perceptible impact on the practices of these families.

These school choices do not fall neatly along familial lines; I encountered instances where the children were keen to continue their schooling while their parents discouraged it and other instances where the parents pushed their children to continue with school but the children—usually adolescents—refused. There is a strong economic element to school choice; publicly-funded school

is free, whereas independent schooling and home schooling have costs associated with them. Good Gingrich (2010), writing about parents “choosing” public schooling for their children, questions whether it can accurately be considered a choice if there are no viable alternatives.

In Manitoba, rates of homeschooling nearly tripled between 2009 and 2016 (Caruk, 2016), and the majority of the growth occurred in the school division in which most LGM families reside. With 12.53% of students in the division being homeschooled, this is the highest percentage in the province, far higher than the provincial average of just below two percent (Caruk, 2016; School Enrolment Report). 3278 students were registered in homeschools in the province for the year. The province does not keep any records about the country of origin or ethnic or religious affiliation for the registered home schools so it is not possible to ascertain what percentage are LGM families. And while the cause in the sharp increase in homeschooling is not entirely clear, multiple interviewees pointed to the creation of a gay/straight alliance as a club in one of the schools as a precipitating factor for many of the LGM families (personal communication, Marlene Rempel, 11 February, 2014). There is no requirement that parents follow a provincially approved curriculum; rather, at the start of each schoolyear parents must notify the provincial homeschooling office about their intention to homeschool their children. At this point they must also submit an education plan, outlining the goals for the year. Throughout the year the parent is obligated to submit two progress reports. An adult must be present in the home throughout the day to conduct lessons or assist where necessary and ‘Parents who homeschool their children must provide a standard of education equivalent to that provided in a public school’ (Department of Education, personal communication, 22 December, 2015).

Homeschooling is an affordable alternative to LGM private school, and is also incredibly portable. It would allow children to slip in and out of the systems in Mexico and Canada with the highest level of ease, while simultaneously ensuring that children would be protected from the corrupting influences of the secular public schools. The major challenge is that it would be difficult for many parents—themselves barely literate in most cases—to prepare an education plan and to submit the twice-yearly required progress reports. There is no guarantee of a visit from the home-school inspector; usually visits only occur when there is cause for concern. Several service workers expressed suspicion that home schooling was used by many parents as a chimera to keep students



out of public schools, and that in some cases little or no formal schooling occurred.

Zine (2007), writing about independent Muslim schools in Canada, argues that independent religious schools serve the dual purpose of instilling the values of the faith while simultaneously insulating students from the often pervasive racism and prejudice in public schools. While many of the families, like the Friesens, might prefer to send their children to one of the independent LGM schools in the region, in order to protect them from 'permissive social norms' of the wider culture (Zine, 2007, p.72), frequent moves curtailed this option for most.

For the same reasons that led their forebears to forego accreditation a hundred years earlier (Ens, 1994)—a strong desire to avoid government oversight—the LGM private schools that function in Manitoba are unaccredited, which means that their teachers are not trained and they are not bound by a provincial curriculum. It also means that they receive no government funding, thereby increasing the burden borne by individual families. Tuition for the Old Colony Mennonite school was \$2,800.00 per year per child, with a 20 percent premium if the family was not part of an Old Colony church. When considered together with the fact that most families have several children, this cost quickly becomes prohibitive for the majority of immigrant families. For instance, if a family had four school-aged children, annual tuition fees would be \$11,200.00.

The Old Colony school operates out of the Sunday School classrooms in the church basement, in small rooms with hand-made posters of Bible verses adorning the walls. Students in the school—35 in total from Kindergarten through Grade 12, came from a variety of academic backgrounds—public school, home school, and from Mennonite independent schools in Mexico and Bolivia. The school was conducted almost entirely in English, save for one hour per week of High German instruction delivered by a nineteen year-old minister's wife. Of the two schools that I observed—an Old Colony school and an ecumenical LGM school—students were divided according to ability, not age. Paul, a Grade Five student, was almost fifteen, but when he switched to the Old Colony school from Grade Nine in the nearby public school, he was placed together with two of his younger siblings. His matter of fact response to this scenario was 'I guess I just have a low IQ'. The schools use the *Christian Light* curriculum,<sup>4</sup> developed in the United States for use by the Old Order Mennonites and Amish (Johnson Weiner, 2007).

Like the public elementary schools in the region, the LGM independent schools began their days with a short devotional

message followed by singing, which, on the day I visited, was the pietistic evangelical chorus, 'I have decided to follow Jesus.' In an interview with Abram Thiessen, the earnest principal of the Old Colony School, he told me that the goal of education was to help students 'serve the Lord,' and that 'the best way to be good citizens is to be good Christians, it doesn't matter where you live' (personal communication, 6 January, 2016). His comment about citizenship regardless of where one lives echoed the 'trans-local' mindset so prevalent within the LGM community. Citizenship was not linked with any particular nation-state, but was tied to the heavenly kingdom of serving God.

One of the strengths of the ethnographic portrait (Jeffrey & Dyon, 2008; Mills & Morton, 2013) is its ability to use the minutiae of the specific to 'speak to large issues' (Geertz, 1973, p.23). Like Boo, an ethnographer of life in an Indian slum (2012, p.249), 'I [have] no pretense that I [can] judge a whole by a sliver,' nevertheless, it is the 'complex specificness' of the ethnographer's findings that make it possible 'think realistically and concretely' about larger concepts, such as modernization, immigration, and integration (Geertz, 1973, p.23). While the techniques of recording field notes, conducting interviews and building relationships with subjects all comprise important facets of ethnography, the enterprise is, as Geertz notes (1973, p.6), an elaborate venture in 'thick description', that is to say, an intricately detailed depiction of the world (or a sliver of the world) of one's subjects. The Friesen family represents the highly transient (im)migrant family subset of the LGM community, one with enduring ties to both Canada and Mexico. The interviews were conducted separately and—in the case of Maria—with the translation assistance of the family's home/school liaison (a sort of unofficial social worker)—who was the one who introduced me to the family.

This family was in a particularly precarious position economically and moved frequently—not only back and forth between Canada and Mexico, but from one rented house to another. In Manitoba, the father worked as a labourer in a local large-scale factory farm while Maria worked at home caring for their seven children and selling her baking to friends and acquaintances. I met her at their house, which even in early spring was cold enough that I wished I had kept my coat on. She hoped they would move soon, to find a house that was warmer and where the children would not have to sleep in the living room. We sat at their kitchen table, a well-worn plywood folding table, the community centre sort with collapsible metal legs, a fitting symbol of their mobile, pack-up-and-go life. We visited while her two-year old daughter sat on her



lap and fidgeted contentedly with some magnets and her barely older son played quietly nearby.

The five older Friesen children were enrolled in the local public schools. The logistical challenges of finding suitable and affordable accommodation for a family of 9 meant frequent moves in and out of different catchment areas, which meant that the students had to change schools each time the family changed houses because they relied on bussing from the school division, a logistical challenge that led to even more instability. Maria expressed concern that her children were not being raised the way she had been, to respect their parents, to sew and cook and to appreciate their own culture.

Language use is one of the sites where the tension of their old and new lives is most evident. Maria recounts her older children making fun of her accent as she tries to read English books to the little ones—ripped books discarded from the school library and sent home to families like the Friesens. She notes that speaking English alienates the family from the father:

Yeah, I, I learn from the kids, my English.... [My husband] doesn't like it when we speak, eh, English. Then he, he doesn't understand that much, and he wants to know what we are saying...the kids they speak always English. Especially when they are angry, angry at each other.... Then they talk English, English is much easier.

It is interesting that for the children, English has become the language through which they are best able to express themselves—and has created a lateral bond from which the parents are excluded. Good Gingrich (2013, p.10) argues that '[p]articipation in school requires children to learn a language that undermines the structure and relationships of the nuclear and extended family, as well as the *Dietsche* culture and religious heritage'.

At 17, Sara was the oldest of seven children. We met at her large suburban high school over lunch, where she was waiting for me outside the office (12 March, 2014). I was struck right away by her forthrightness, her confident, deeper-than-expected voice, and her bright open countenance marked by adolescent acne. As we navigated the noisy, lunch-crowded halls, teeming with teenagers in skinny jeans and branded tops, I was struck by how different Sara appeared from her peers, how her dress marked her as visibly Other. Her silky blond hair was pulled into a bun and she wore a dress her mother had sewn, long and black with large purple roses, but concealed under an oversized white hoodie.

She is one of a handful of Old Colony students to attend secondary school—she estimated that out of the roughly 750 students in

her school, there were four fellow Low German Mennonites. She admitted facing a lot of pressure, from her Old Colony friends, her father, and her grandparents to quit school so she could focus on the vocational training necessary for a woman in her community, so that she could contribute more financially to the family, and also to protect her mind from being corrupted by the secular Canadian system. Her bubbly disposition and frequent use of the word 'awesome' belied her obvious conflict about her goals for her future. She spoke longingly of a desire for a career, perhaps as a health care aide. I knew from interviewing the home/school liaison that Sara was an honour roll student, and when I questioned her about whether she had considered studying nursing or medicine, she said there was no way she could afford it but thought she might be able to afford the health care aid training available through a local community college. She worked four days a week at a popular fast food chain, but of her earnings, 90% went to help support the family, while she was allowed to keep the remaining 10%, which meant just over a dollar an hour. Sara had recently spent her spring break sewing two traditional dresses in an attempt to catch up on the learning valued by her family.

Before high school Sara had only finished one school year in a single country. As a child, she found the frequent moves difficult. (Salomone, 2008, p.573) While globalization has increased the ease of return migrations and connection to homelands, that this does not mean that the frequent crossings no longer exact a heavy emotional, social, and financial toll, as is evidenced by Sara's description of the frequent moves as 'the worst experience ever', because 'you have to learn English here and then you got to learn German there again and.... And I was never going to be, like, English all the way properly, right?' The family's highly transnational lifestyle was experienced as a burden, engendering a scenario in which she always felt 'betwixt and between' (Turner, 1967), neither Canadian nor Mexican (interview 11 March, 2014). At 13 years old Sara completed school in Mexico, and then returned again to Canada where she matriculated into the local public high school.

She is in a difficult position, where she feels pressured by teachers to finish high school and pressured by family to quit. She credited a teacher with encouraging her to continue:

In Grade Eight I really worked hard because I loved my teacher... She was amazing... Yeah, she- because she was the one actually helping me decide to go to high school... She just told me that I would apparently be a really good nurse or if not that I would be a good health care aid or [unclear] like, [get] these awesome jobs and stuff. So....



As we visited over Happy Meals at a crowded McDonald's, it became evident that three years after choosing to continue her schooling, she still felt a lack of certainty about her decision. She said:

At the beginning, I- I really wanted to, right? And I really didn't want to. Because my parents said, um, what's the point of going to high school? [I'm] like, um, maybe there is a point... And then, um, yeah, so, um, it was really a tough decision to make but I'm happy that I made the decision. Because most of my Low German friends, they all- they all dropped out of high school... They just, kind of, have a part time job and they just be like a mother, like- like learn how to be a mother, like, at home or something.

A common criticism was not only about the dangers arising from too much knowledge, but also from the worldly behaviour that apparently abounded in high school: "There are people that do drugs, I know that. And there are people that do [bad] stuff. But that can happen anywhere.... If I'm supposed to be doing that, I could be doing that at home or something." She then mentioned that it was in Mexico, on a Sunday afternoon, socializing with other *Dietsche* teenagers that she had tried her first beer, not at high school in Winkler.

She spoke most animatedly about her boyfriend—a Mennonite from Mexico who had been in Canada for two years. He worked at a local farm and had a car and barely spoke English and for her it did not matter that he had only seven years of school. They had been together for seven months and had already discussed marriage, though she thought that she might try to finish school before getting married, but admitted that 'you never know what ... might happen, right?' Even her mother mentioned that Sara's priorities appeared to have shifted recently.

Sara was one of the few people with extensive experience in both the Old Colony system and the Canadian public one, and her insights into the competing purposes of education revealed an impressive ability to dissect the merits and shortcomings of each. She said that school in Mexico is about tradition and about religious instruction whereas in Canada "it's about spending a long time getting to know yourself." In her words:

In Mexico, I think it's to teach how to...be raised a good Christian, I think. Like, right?... Like, everything you do there is you just saying Christian stuff. You pray. You learn different kind of verses, prayers, and stuff.... Everything is related to just- just doing that, right? Like, you learn the Bible, and then you learn the catechism.... I guess you

learn how to write a little bit.... Like, because...I guess, you're not expected to read, right?

It was interesting that she accepted illiteracy as a given, that there was simply no expectation that one would be able to read and no judgment on her part. The issue of what constitutes literacy among Old Colonists is a matter of considerable controversy (Hedges, 1996; Crocker, 2014; Saunders-Currie, 2017) but for Sara it was clear.

Unlike in Mexico, where the emphasis is on 'how to be raised a good Christian,' in Canada she felt that one of the main goals of education is to allow students time and space to reflect on the world in which they live, who they are, and who they might become:

And, yeah. But, for here, the purpose, um...um, how would I word this? Um. I think it's, like, to just, um, let's say if you start working from very young age, right? You're never going to feel like you have a life of just getting to know yourself, like...really thinking of, who am I? What do I want to do I want to do with my future, right? Like, you're just stuck on the job and you're thinking, man, I have to do this for the rest of my life. This is going to suck.

Her primary criticism of the Canadian system is that teachers are too forceful, always trying to push students into going to school, including her own 14 year-old brother, Peter:

I think, um, the teachers should just let the kids choose. Like, not force them to go school. Like, teachers have been really pushing my brother... But, in some ways that's a good thing. But some ways it's not...I mean, like, my brother, ...he doesn't want a high job. He just wants to be a farmer or, like...something plain, you know?... And like, that you can get without going to school.... It shouldn't be forced that they have to go to school till 18.

Peter's refusal to go to school was a point of frustration within the family. According to their mother, his antipathy towards schooling caused her considerable grief. Peter simply 'said to me I don't go to school anymore' to which she replied, 'yeah you would' but she expressed doubts about whether or not he would end up returning to school, citing a lack of support from her husband, 'he doesn't care because he doesn't like school either'.

In Mexico, when children finish school around 12 years of age, there is a natural transition into apprenticing with one's parents and then finding work in nearby shops and on farms or contributing to the household (Sawatzky, 1970). In Canada, following this



tradition is complicated by several factors. First, Canadian labour law makes it difficult for young adolescents to work outside of the home; second, most fathers are engaged as wage labourers and cannot easily take their sons to work, and third, many families live in rented houses in town and consequently do not have traditional agricultural labour for sons to do. Maria referred to this when she confessed that Peter now has to do some of the chores traditionally reserved for girls: 'Uh, Peter has to do it [the same chores as the daughters].... Because my husband makes him. He has to do something because outside is no work'.

Maria expressed frustration that the Canadian school system failed to accommodate boys like Peter, diminishing their enthusiasm for work, and depleting their energy and ambition: "I often think, why they have to become so old before they can start learning to work. Like for boys. Because when they're younger, they have more energies in their body...and then they think no, before I didn't have to go to work, now I don't want to go... ." Interestingly, Maria saw more merit in girls continuing their schooling: 'for girls, that's, uh, different, I think... 'Cause, lots of girls they learn how to be a teacher or...Or a nurse, or stuff like that, that they need more school sometimes'. Ultimately, for Maria school serves a pragmatic function—that of instilling discipline into children and managing their natural impulse for mischief: 'If they just stayed at home, they would get too crazy in the head, they would get too many ideas.'—it is worth highlighting that Maria's idea of school is the place to send children to help them get rid of ideas!

Sara was one of very few LGM students who chose to continue her schooling at the main high school campus. The school division, aware of its struggle to attract members of her community to the main campus, created a separate 'off-campus' alternative learning high school program specifically for LGM students in the early 2000s, following the lead of school divisions in Ontario which had experienced success with such efforts (such as the Elmira Life and Work School). Larry Toews, an administrator at the school division, described the district's efforts to retain LGM students as a challenge, but an area in which strides were being made (personal communication, 8 December, 2015). The off-campus high school was housed in an unassuming industrial park and looked like all the other metal clad warehouses in the area. The alternative high school—of which the LGM program was one program—was meant to attract and retain students who struggled in a conventional classroom setting. The LGM program was designed to convince students and their parents to stay in the system past Grade Eight, the point at which students finish middle school and matriculate

into the secondary school. This was the key point at which students were lost, electing instead to stay home and help care for younger siblings, or seek employment at fast food restaurants or factory farms. According to Toews, one of the key challenges was dispelling myths about the schools and creating a bond of trust. The Alternative education program designed for LGM students was taught by both LGM and non-LGM teachers and the curriculum was designed with an understanding of the culture and likely career trajectory of the students in mind. While all students worked together for the academic portion of the program, for the applied components students were separated according to gender. The boys took courses in diesel mechanics and woodworking, and the girls studied culinary arts, sewing and horticulture. Special projects, such as *Schwiene schlachten* or hog slaughtering, were organized at local farms in order to help students gain the skills necessary for success in their communities. When I questioned the principal of this school about whether this school might be perceived as streaming based on ethnicity, he expressed few concerns because it was intended not to divert LGM students away from the main campus, but as a way to entice non-attenders to continue their schooling. Interestingly, Sara never mentioned the alternative school, neither as an option for herself nor her brother.

In certain domains, *Dietsche* parents afforded their children a high degree of autonomy and self-determination. Maria, for instance, when asked if she thought her children would attend high school, stated, 'I let it... I leave it up to them, if they want to they can', a position echoed by most LGM parents. The sense that children could decide for themselves whether or not they would continue with their schooling into secondary school, or whether or not they would graduate or pursue post-secondary school runs counter to common mainstream understandings of a parent's role in shaping their child's future, in which parents exert a high degree of influence on their children's activities, the 'concerted cultivation' approach described by Lareau (2011).

Most LGM parents do not appear to devote time to contemplating their children's futures, something which initially surprised me, but which I came to regard as consistent with their history as an agricultural people. In only one interview was a mother able to say what sorts of careers her children wished to pursue and the sorts of careers she envisioned for them. The goal, for most families, was that life would continue on as it had been—that children would gradually take their place alongside their parents—in the field, in the kitchen, and in the church pew. Traditionally, women have remained in the home and men have worked the land or taken



jobs in the agricultural sector. When seen from this perspective, the suspicion Sara's family harboured towards her schooling makes sense, what Good Gingrich (2013, p.6) describes as 'an unnecessary burden'.

In the past, men would have worked their own land, whereas today, they are often wage labourers in the agricultural or industrial sectors (Loewen, 2013). Though the switch to manufacturing and consequent need for more schooling is framed by schools in Canada and community leaders in Mexico as a contemporary problem, Aeltester Isaak M. Dyck, in his memoir, noted that Aeltester Johann Wiebe, who led the migration from Russia to Manitoba in the 1870s, decried the perceived need for increased schooling both in Russia and then later in Canada: "And the trade industry grew like wild among us, out of which the necessity of learning the language of the land arose, and the public schools begin to be seen as a need. But keeping God's word, following and obeying his voice, to this the eyes and the hearts became deaf." (Dyck, 1995, p.19, translation mine)

When considered from this perspective, the options are limited. Furthering one's schooling does not necessarily lead to a better outcome, particularly if the outcome the parents desire most for their offspring is to continue to lead a simple life consistent with the values of the Old Colony or other LGM congregation, as Maria articulated so clearly in the interview. Although these parents would like to maintain a more traditional lifestyle, economic constraints and the opportunity for wage labour have brought them to Canada, where they are legally obliged to send their children to school. Financial limitations dictate that secular public schooling is the only viable option for their children.

For those interviewees who did pursue further schooling, it did lead them out of the church of their parents in every case except one; some left to join a more evangelical Mennonite churches and one left the Church altogether. Therein lies the conundrum faced by LGM parents returning to Canada; the desire to see one's children learn English, further their schooling, be able to read and write, and improve their economic opportunities simultaneously means that they risk them leaving the church, losing their ability to speak the language of their people, and loosening their network of ties with family and friends in Mexico—a dilemma which is not easily reconciled. For many of these families, this is a decision with perceived eternal implications. Isaak M. Dyck, one of the most prominent Old Colony Aeltester of the twentieth century, expressed these fears in his memoir—written in the 1970s but reflecting on the turmoil experienced by those who left Canada in

the early 1920s: "But Pharaoh was behind us with his whole army, namely, the powerful school pressure, and each one knew that [117] turning back to Canada meant willingly bring one's children under the flag, under militarism, and throwing our children into the river of this world." (Dyck, 1995, pp.116-117, translation mine) For Dyck, sending their children to public schools was tantamount to abandoning them to the world, and served as the primary motivator for the exodus to Mexico.

Frequent transnational migrations between Canada and Mexico have prevented many of immigrants from feeling that they belonged in either place. For the Friesen family, schooling was a source of considerable intra-familial conflict. Learning English, and learning what Sara described as 'stuff that comes out of the world' created tension between children and parents. As the children became 'more Canadian' the parents feared that they were losing their children's respect. In order to preserve their way of life they came to Canada for improved economic opportunities and a higher standard of living, but in so doing jeopardized critical aspects of their identity. The legacy of the past continues to shape the present; aside from the few who have fully embraced schooling, most Old Colony parents do not send their children to school past Grade Eight, regarding too much knowledge as a dangerous thing, and high schools as sites of worldly contamination.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Quote from Sara Friesen, seventeen-year-old high school student (pseudonyms used throughout), relaying a common criticism she hears from friends and family about her decision to attend public secondary school.
- <sup>2</sup> Quote from Maria Friesen (a pseudonym), a Low German Mennonite immigrant to Winkler, Manitoba from Chihuahua, Mexico.
- <sup>3</sup> A group of Mennonites from Saskatchewan emigrated to Paraguay in the 1920s.
- <sup>4</sup> One of the service providers jokingly said that the 'light' in Christian Light referred not to the light of Christ, but to the fact that this curriculum lacked academic rigour (18 December, 2013).



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