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Children's Rights and low German Mennonite Youth in Alberta

by

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Hank and Clara Van Beers, for their unfailing support and for
and encouraging a lifetime of learning
and
to my students for teaching me far more than I ever taught them.

ABSTRACT

The educational experiences of Low German Mennonite youth are greatly impacted by other aspects of their lives, revealing the importance of studying education in relation to the societal, cultural, educational, and familial contexts in which youth function. This qualitative research attempted to provide a forum for the voices of these youth to be heard. Student interviews and newspaper items provided rich data that spoke to the experiences of this distinct population. Utilizing a critical children's rights framework for the study allowed for a deeper understanding of the societal complexities as they converged with education. Work, family obligations, other forms of schooling, and the fear of cultural change all appear to have significant influence on the education that Mennonite youth receive in Alberta. Highlighting these factors through the lens of the best interests of the child principle reveals the importance of utilizing children's perspectives when decisions are made concerning these youth.

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CHAPTER 1: INITITATING THE RESEARCH

Throughout rural southern Alberta, as well as in small pockets in central and northern Alberta, classrooms have been opening their doors to the children of a conservative Mennonite people who have returned to Canada after several decades attempting to eke out a living on Latin American soils. The incredible influx in recent decades of Low German Mennonites migrating to Alberta to obtain employment in the agricultural sector has raised the issue of whether children of this cultural group should be educated according to provincial regulations and curriculum or to their own cultural norms. Traditionally opposed to formal, public schooling, Mennonite parents have been forced to make decisions about the education their children receive in an entirely new and unfamiliar setting. At times, their choices have pitted them against public officials who desire to see Mennonite youth educated to provincial standards and assimilated into mainstream Alberta. Schools are then faced with the dilemma of determining how to educate such large numbers of transitory English language learners who may or may not have utilized the province's education system throughout their school-age years. Caught in the middle of this are the Mennonite children and youth whose lives and futures are being debated and discussed in this adult-only world.

This research attempts to provide a forum for the voices of these youth to be heard. Through individual interviews with Mennonite youth who accessed alternative forms of public education within a rural region of Alberta, the opinions of those who are most affected by the decisions being made about them by government, school districts, public officials, and parents are unveiled. In a bid to understand where youth who were not accessing school systems could be found, the research also utilized media pieces to get a glimpse of the experiences of those who were not present in the public school system. It was desirable to compare their experiences with those of the student participants to create a deeper understanding of Mennonite youths' experiences overall. The invisibility of the non-school attending youth was revealed first in their very absence from the study – the inability to find these participants led to the use of the news pieces rather

than the planned interviews – and in the results of the data findings, further enhancing the significance of research with this particular population.

The study was imperative as so little work has been done in this area to date. In the past, one school division has sought out the opinions of Mennonite parents in regards to the education of their children (see Gilmore, 2000) to assist schools in providing culturally-sensitive programming. As a result, the district worked to meet the unique needs of these students, providing for German language classes in addition to English as a Second Language programming, and ensuring that students could continue to observe cultural customs, including traditional dress and religious holidays. In spite of this, however, the wishes of the children and youth themselves still have not been heard in any formal way. This research seeks to contribute to that prior work by projecting the words of Mennonite youth into the forefront, using a critical children's rights framework as the foundation for the discussion.

Why Me? Researcher Location and Perspective

As a result of Gilmore's (2000) study (see above), the described school division designed an outreach program for the Low German Mennonite population in a bid to encourage more parents to send their children to public school for longer periods of time. Parents were promised the use of prayer, religious content and a German language class for their children to improve their literacy in their first language. All other subjects were taught in English and followed Alberta curriculum. Students of junior and senior high age with all abilities were welcomed. It was in this one-room school that I found myself at the beginning of my teaching career and where I taught for eight years.

Being intensely involved in the education of students within this population in the manner that I was suggests my particular location within this study. As the researcher, it was important for me to acknowledge my ties to this population and my ongoing interest in working with youth from this cultural group. Over the course of my eight years working in the program, I was the primary teacher for over 100 students. During my tenure in the program, only four of those students earned a high school diploma due to their efforts. Since that

point, nine more have joined their ranks. However, more students have attended the school in the four years that I have been gone, leading to an even larger pool of students with the potential to complete an Alberta education. While each success was thoroughly and publicly celebrated, in terms of high school completion rates – which Alberta Education is currently quite preoccupied with (see Alberta Education, 2009) – such statistics are dismal.

Being myself a product of public education within this province, coupled with the fact that I was born to immigrant parents who extoled the virtues of education (my father even served on the local school board for a dozen years), it was very difficult for me to understand why my students and their parents would not also appreciate the importance of learning. This simply reveals the privilege with which I was raised. I experienced the freedom to not only become a high school graduate but was encouraged, and even financially supported, to enhance that education with post-secondary studies. This background separated me from my students and instilled in me a value towards education that I arrogantly attempted to imprint upon those in the Mennonite world to which I found myself tied.

It was the caring relationships which grew due to the uniqueness of this program that helped me to better understand the perspectives of my students and their parents. Through my interactions with various Mennonite people in an array of settings, I was educated about their culture, values, and religious beliefs and grew to appreciate all of these aspects immensely. I credit those interactions to the characteristics of a school that appeared to be unlike any other in the province. As the school welcomed students between the ages of 12 through 19, there was the possibility for young people to be in the program for several years. While the transitory nature of the population meant that students could have been school attendees for as little as one month, it also meant that students could potentially complete their entire secondary schooling career in one setting. For instance, one student attended the school for approximately six years in order to obtain his high school diploma. The role of being his teacher for that length of time instilled in me a more personal responsibility for his learning than might otherwise be the

case and allowed me to better comprehend his learning strengths, weaknesses, and aspirations for the future. My understandings of and experiences in other school structures led me to question how common an experience such student-teacher relationships really are.

In addition, the relatively small number of students attending the program at any one time encouraged us to learn about one another. I can easily recall days where only a handful of students would show up to school, providing ample time for myself and our full-time educational assistant to work individually with attendees. I believe that this abundance of one-on-one time strengthened our relationships with another. Finally, the school environment itself contributed to our learning relationships. Situated away from the other local schools, we all shared one classroom with students of various ages learning in the same space. Such knowledge of one another's struggles and victories created a bond that is possibly unique to that educational setting. I believe that having contact with and the responsibility for educating students for an extended period of time, in such an unusual environment, enhances the student-teacher relationships that result. Not only was I able to know students as people, I was privileged to be able to witness the process of their growth into the adults they would become.

It became vitally important to me that my students would have a say in who their future selves would be. I saw the struggles that many of them faced in order to remain in this formal, albeit non-traditional, school system: daughters who had to argue with mothers to simply get on the school bus in the morning instead of staying home to help with domestic responsibilities; sons who were encouraged to become men by leaving school to earn a wage in the agricultural sector; children who were required to spend autumn school days grading potatoes in a quanset to bolster their family's financial position. Aspirations of graduating with a high school diploma, more often than not, were pushed aside by these concerns of everyday life within the Mennonite world. As educators that can be difficult to come to grips with, as we are generally not in the business of unfulfilled dreams. Our expectations of educational success usually include diplomas and those of us in secondary education find ourselves encouraging

students to think beyond high school. However, in speaking with my students and being given the opportunity to hear about their own hopes and ambitions, it was no longer my expectations of the education they should have that was my focus. Rather my concern centred on what my students told me they wanted for themselves and how I, as an educator, was implicated in the process of either helping or hindering them in achieving those goals.

It was from this position that I approached this research. I was concerned with the futures of youth who, like my students, would likely have to find their place in a society that is very different from the one that their parents grew up in. I worried that the education they have received (or in some cases have not received) was ill-preparing them for life in the hyper-neoliberal, economic-driven, market-based world in which we Albertans currently find ourselves. However, in readying Low German Mennonite youth for the future, it was no longer my expectations of the education they should have that mattered. Instead, I wanted to hear what youth said they wanted for themselves. Just because I may have defined educational success as obtaining a high school diploma that does not mean that Mennonite youth saw it as a necessity. Opening myself to the possibility that the ideas of my former students were not representative of Mennonite youth on the whole allowed me to focus on the words of the youth in a bid to better understand their individual experiences and ideas in regards to success in education.

Engaging in Research With the Low German Mennonite Population

Conducting research with this group requires an acknowledgement of both the lack of current literature in relation to the education of the Low German Mennonite population as well as their reticence to participate in research in general. The scarcity of literature regarding the education of Low German Mennonites within Alberta is indeed astounding considering that in some areas the group comprises a majority of the population of rural schools in southern Alberta (see Dempster, 2013, October 7 as one example). Of major significance in setting the stage for this study is the unpublished Masters' thesis described above (see Gilmore, 2000) that serves to create a foundation upon which to work. In it, the author revealed that while some Low German Mennonite families were

utilizing the public school system, others were opting for private or home education alternatives. Still others were essentially abstaining from any form of education for their children. Gilmore (2000) concluded that not schooling was the preferred choice for 50-70% of Low German Mennonite parents (p. 117), leading school board officials to believe that there were at least 500-1,000 children not accounted for in any schooling system within the school division that was studied (p. 115; Dempster, 2013, October 7).

A full decade has passed since this work was completed, in which even more Mennonites have traveled to Canada, either temporarily in search of seasonal employment or on a full-time basis. Ontario, Manitoba and now Saskatchewan have also seen their Low German Mennonite populations expand with the bulk of these migrants preferring the first province. Even so, current scholarly work that exists does not address education for this booming population to any degree. Documents are either historical in nature or focus on other fields and merely hint at the need for education within this population.

Examination of those historical documents is essential in providing the insight into the cultural and religious beliefs of this private group and will be examined further in the subsequent chapter. Literature that focuses on the health concerns of Low German Mennonites within southern Alberta is a growing body and adds to the information about the culture, beliefs, and population numbers within Alberta. With some members of this group undocumented by governmental organizations, population estimates become difficult to nail down. In 2005, Hall et al. noted that the population estimates for Alberta were approximately 15,000, most of whom live in the southern part of the province (Hall, Kulig, Campbell, Wall & Babcock, 2005, p. 96). In 2009, however, Kulig et al. revealed that this same group in Alberta was still gauged to be between 12,000 and 15,000 people (Kulig, Babcock, Wall & Hill, 2009, p. 5). Anyone living in small town southern Alberta would find it impossible to believe that this group had not grown in size over that four year span due to the continued emergence of Low German Mennonites obtaining work and housing in the rural areas of the province. It has proven rather difficult to obtain any viable

information regarding the population size of this group, even with the assistance of the local Mennonite Central Committee office whose work focuses mainly on this group. Those not in the health sector seem particularly at a loss for acquiring any such data as provincial privacy laws prohibit health agencies from sharing information with other service providers. Because of such laws, school divisions have been unable to obtain statistics that could assist them in estimating population sizes.

Research done in the arena of health services does enhance the understanding of what it is like to work with this cultural group, however. The private nature of this population is highlighted, with some researchers noting that the qualitative work they undertook was "intrusive to a religious group of people who strive to remain isolated from mainstream society" (Hall & Kulig, 2004, p. 363). Such information provides a warning to researchers to use compassion and respect for religious beliefs in dealing with Low German Mennonite people, as is often true for conducting research with marginalized groups. It also speaks to the necessity of establishing ties within the community in order to build trust and respect between researchers and Low German people. Any research that attempts to work with this particular cultural group would need to rely heavily on relationship-building.

Hall and Kulig go on to mention that the Mennonite participants they encountered "felt that being part of the study was an opportunity for them to share their views with others, which, as a rule, they do not do" (2004, p. 395). This insight makes it reasonable to believe that by encouraging Low German Mennonite youth to share their own opinions and beliefs, studies like this may reinforce the importance of the youths' ideas. This may help them to realize that they have knowledge and experiences of value for themselves and others.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

The limited opportunities that these youth have been given to share this knowledge about how they are impacted by their current situation reveals the importance of this study. As a response to this situation, this research study sought to explore the perceptions that Low German Mennonite youth had in regards to

success in education. While the original study that inspired my school to take shape was key in addressing the needs of this distinct population (see Gilmore, 2000), the voices of youth themselves still had not been noted more than a decade later. Since their perceptions of life in Alberta may vary from those of their parents, it was important to allow youth to articulate the relevance they see education as having in their lives. By defining educational success for themselves, youth could potentially provide schools and divisions that have large Low German Mennonite populations with information which would help educational institutions to ensure that programs address the needs and desires of these youth. In addition, contributing in this manner could help participants to recognize that their opinions have value and can serve to improve the quality of school programs for their peers while contributing to their own enhanced self-esteem (Lundy, 2007).

My experience teaching at the alternative program described above revealed to me the importance of providing relevant educational opportunities for these youth. Overwhelmingly, my students came from homes where they were the first in the family to attend school beyond an elementary level. While a few of them graduated with a high school diploma, a common symbol of educational success within Alberta, the significant majority of them left school at some point to join the workforce, in most cases before even reaching high school age. Even with the opportunity to attend this purposely-cultivated program, there were still many other Low German Mennonite youth who were not utilizing any educational systems being offered to them. It is thought that cultural beliefs about education, coupled with the desire for families to earn more money, influence Low German Mennonite youth to leave school at surprisingly young ages (Gilmore, 2000). With virtually no other scholarly work done in the area of education for Low German Mennonites in Alberta, this study was intended to shed light on the experiences of these youth. It asked young members of this cultural group what they were seeking from education and what they believed would help them to attain the goals they had made for themselves. With this intent in mind, the study was guided by these questions:

- What are Low German Mennonite youths' perceptions of educational success?
- What factors do they see as inhibiting that success?
- How do they see their school experiences as impacting that success?

Moving Forward

In light of these concerns regarding this particular population and the questions being posed, it becomes necessary to pause prior to the discussion of the theoretical framework that commonly follows the introductory work of research reports. Integral to any discussion of the Low German Mennonite group is an awareness of their cultural history. It is vital to understand the beliefs and experiences of this population in order to fully grasp their current reactions to public education in Canada which drive the decisions they make regarding their children's participation in it. Therefore, the following chapter attempts to lay out the events which have brought this group to Alberta at this time and to provide a window into their perceptions of culture, education, and family. Such a discussion will bring greater meaning to the literature regarding critical children's rights that will appear in the subsequent chapter.

CHAPTER 2: CULTURAL CONTEXTS – FAITH, FARMING & FAMILY

Understanding the issues surrounding the education of Low German Mennonite youth in southern Alberta today requires an overview of the migrational path that brought them to this location at this time. The current experiences of these youth are clarified by looking at the Low German Mennonite population through the historical maintenance of their faith, their reliance on an agrarian lifestyle, and their emphasis on familial bonds. Evaluating the historical construction and maintenance of the faith provides a foundation on which to better comprehend the values and beliefs that currently influence members of this group. Recognizing the desire for separation from the outside world in order to preserve their faith sheds light on their use of language, migrations, and educational control to maintain that physical and cultural gap. This cultural context then impacts their responses (or lack thereof) to the economic issues that affect their traditional agrarian livelihoods. This in turn informs individuals' reactions to these dilemmas in determining the best course of action for their families, some of whom make the decision to return to Canada in pursuit of greater opportunities.

Faith – The Construction of the Mennonite Culture

Migratory Beginnings

The history of the Low German Mennonite people reads as a long list of migrations that contribute significantly to the group's current cultural identity. Global travellers before the modern conveniences of air travel or wireless communication, Mennonites used migration as a means of sustaining their lifestyle and protecting their religious beliefs after initially using it to save their own lives. In doing so, they have successfully maintained their culture for generations with little variance, utilizing their system of education as a tool for socializing their children into the Mennonite faith and lifestyle (Quiring, 2003). Arising shortly after the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, the Mennonite faith was originally part of the Anabaptist movement that believed in pledging allegiance to God rather than a nation, adult baptism and the principle of pacifism (Palmer, 1972). These beliefs earned them intense persecution throughout Europe,

resulting even in the deaths of some of the earliest followers of the faith (Palmer, 1972). This forced them to spend centuries seeking out a place where they could live and practice their faith without interference from others, including government authorities.

The migrational history of this group began with a trek from their original homeland of Switzerland to Holland. Mennonites of the time harboured the hope that they would be able to adhere freely to their religious convictions without fear of persecution or martyrdom. It was there that the Mennonite denomination discovered its namesake in the form of Menno Simons, a Catholic priest who embraced the Reformation's goal of ensuring that people could read the Bible for themselves (Redekop, 1969), a belief which separated them from others of the Christian faith. This separation encouraged the creation of a collective church entity in which individualism was shunned and the good of the group became the focus.

The dream of freedom from oppression was not to be experienced in Holland as a lack of religious toleration coaxed a second migration, this time to West Prussia (Redekop, 1969). Able to reside in Prussia peacefully for some time, Mennonites acquired land, wealth, and a sense of stability. Setting themselves up in colonies, they became accustomed to practicing their faith free from intrusion, educating their children in the manner they deemed fit, and cultivating the land they had settled. It was also here that a German dialect, referred to as Plattdeutsch or Low German, would become the Mennonite language of choice (Gilmore, 2000). By consciously selecting a language not in common use in Prussia, the Mennonites were further able to separate themselves from the world outside their colonies. This separation was seen as vital for the maintenance of the culture.

Over time, however, outside influences squeezed into their lives once again. When the Mennonites required more land for their growing population, those in Prussia refused to grant it to them (Redekop, 1969). This lack of room for expansion, in addition to the threat of compulsory military service, created a desire within some Mennonites to leave Prussia. The means for such a withdrawal came from Catherine the Great in 1789. Assurance of religious freedom

persuaded many Mennonites to settle in Russia. Nearly a century of peaceful existence there allowed them to solidify their faith in isolation from other groups while at the same time build an education system in which they could instruct their children in the beliefs and values that were deemed significant by the group.

This segregated lifestyle was threatened once again in the 1870s when Alexander II introduced new reforms that "were meant to transform the Russian feudal state into a homogenous, integrated society in which no special privileges would exist for any one group" (Quiring, 2003, p. 17). The Mennonite people were distressed by these reforms as they entailed the 'Russification' of the private Mennonite schools they had set up, in addition to imposed military service that would conflict with their pacifist views (Quiring, 2003). The Russian desire to build a state that would promote the assimilation and cultural homogenization of its people was important to the building of the Russian nation-state (Cañás Bottos, 2008). Once again being punished for their difference (and their desire to remain so), Mennonites found themselves in a struggle with the state to retain their independence and autonomy. Their allegiance to God and not an earthly nation caused them to resist Russian attempts to assimilate them. It was at this point in their history where the gravity of maintaining educational control for the perpetuation of the Mennonite culture and beliefs started to become evident.

The Canadian Chapter

This resistance culminated in about one-third of Russia's Mennonite population exiting the country and leaving for other nations. Upwards of 7,500 of those 18,000 emigrants found themselves in Canada by the mid-1870s (Palmer, 1972). Settling mainly in Manitoba, they arrived armed with promises from a Canadian government that was eager to negotiate a deal with this group in exchange for having tracts of land settled by European immigrants. Immunity from military service, freedom of both religion and education, the right to affirm instead of swear oaths (Quiring, 2003), and 160 acres of free land for each settler over 21 years of age (Palmer, 1972) were what the Mennonites found waiting for them in their new country. The settlements laid aside for these immigrants were located on either side of the Red River, south of Winnipeg. Most of the

Mennonites who were to become the ancestors of the present-day Low German sect were located on the West Reserve settlement, while other, less conservative Mennonites put down roots in the East Reserve. The West Reserve was deemed the Chortitza – 'old colony' – after a settlement in Russia, providing the name to which this particular branch of Mennonites would come to be referred to (Redekop, 1969).

Their ultra-conservative ways often distinguished these Old Colony Mennonites from others within the denomination. This branch of Mennonites believed that their culture needed to remain just as it had been when their ancestors were called to become Mennonites centuries earlier (Quiring, 2003). Therefore, they rejected most forms of technology, managing to exist for generations without the modern conveniences as they became available, to the point of forbidding the use of either electricity or rubber tires on tractors. This adherence to the old ways further separated them from the outside world as well as from other, more progressive sects of the Mennonite faith.

Although Mennonites of all varieties had been guaranteed the freedom to educate their children in their own manner, the issue of education would quickly turn up in Canada just as it had in Russia. The Mennonites had put their faith in the federal government, which was seeking settlers for the west. They did not realize that the promise of educational freedom that they had been given was outside of the Canadian government's purview (Quiring, 2003). The responsibility for educating the children of Manitoba was actually under the authority of the newly-minted provincial government, a responsibility which Manitoba seemed ready to take on. Thus, the arrival of the Mennonites coincided with the emergence of Manitoba's public education system, leading to conflicting ideas regarding education between the government and Manitoba's newest immigrants.

Once again it appeared that Mennonite contentment was to be threatened by a government that was attempting to homogenize them into citizens of a state (Quiring, 2003). Passed in 1890, the Manitoba Schools Act dictated that public schools would become secular spaces with English as the sole language of instruction. The neglect of the Act to stipulate mandatory attendance for students

allowed the Mennonites to continue with the private schools they had set up for nearly two decades. This oversight was corrected in 1916 when failure to comply with the new School Attendance Act resulted in fines and even imprisonment for some Mennonite parents who refused to send their children to public school (Sawatzky, 1971).

This pressure from the Manitoban government reinforced the conviction of some of the more conservative Mennonites to reassert control over their children's education and persuaded them to seek out yet a new place to settle. It was believed that if the private Mennonite schools were taken over it would not be long before their religion would also be lost for "as the school so the church" (Quiring, 2003, p. 46). This particular group was fiercely determined to retain their unique cultural and religious identity and had no desire to become assimilated Canadians. Recognizing the important role education played in the maintenance of their beliefs, they sought out new spaces once again. After choosing Mexico as their newest destination – once again with the assurance of the religious and educational freedom they demanded – approximately 6,000 Mennonites left Canada in the 1920s to set up colonies in the states of Chihuahua and Durango (Gilmore, 2000, p.95; Mueller, 2005, p. 38), with a few of those heading to other Latin American countries such as Bolivia (Palmer, 1972).

The decision to migrate was not limited solely to the Old Colony faithful, although they made up approximately 90% of the emigrants (Fretz and Sawatzky, 2010). Members of other conservative Mennonite churches, such as the Sommerfelder and Kleine Gemende Mennonites, joined the movement south. Families from varying Mennonite backgrounds chose to leave based on pressure from church leaders, personal convictions, the commitment of relatives to the cause, the desire for land, and various combinations of the aforementioned. Even though the migration was framed as a decision based on religious and educational freedom, it is likely that all of the migrants had individual reasons for joining the procession. Thus, the notion that the real reason for the abandonment of Canada "was the fear of loss of their young people", as Redekop cites, (1969, p. 160) may not be entirely accurate. While the position that the church must remain in control

of education was certainly a factor in the move, it was likely not the sole motive for all of the emigrants. However, over time this belief became almost legendary among those who left, helping to bolster this group's own unique Mennonite identity, even though their reasons for exiting Canada may not be have been as clear-cut as is now believed. In fact, the varying reasons for the migration resulted in a jumble of Mennonite peoples in Latin America.

This mixture of faithful followers would come to be known as Kanadier Mennonites – those believers who left Canada in search of freedom and religion (Friesen, 1990). While maintaining their separation even between one another in Latin America, the groups would later be referred to collectively upon their return to Canada towards the end of the 20th century. Over time, it appears that some groups felt uncomfortable with this label, resulting in the overall population currently being referred to as Low German Mennonites, and now even Low German-Speaking Mennonites, due to the use of this language by all of the sects being represented. No matter the differences between the various groups, however, the designs of the educational systems they constructed in the south were much the same.

Preserving a Culture: Schooling Young Mennonites in Mexico

The relative isolation they experienced in Mexico and other Latin American nations enabled the Low German Mennonites to not only hold onto their beliefs and values but to strengthen them. As such, they quite possibly intensified the cultural identity that united them. Separation from the world and living collectively, a component of their faith that they believed to be vital to their salvation (Edmunds, 1993), was aided by the fact that colonies were established away from Mexican towns. In addition, the continued use of the Low German or Plattdeutsch dialect that had been designated as this group's language during the era of European migrations, further promoted such detachment. The agricultural livelihood that had sustained this group for generations was also intended to enable their self-imposed segregation, as it was thought that it would ensure the self-sufficiency of the group. Working collectively, the Mennonites attempted to reject any reliance on outsiders, including the government, for economic,

educational or spiritual assistance. Farming consequently came to be seen as the most noble of professions, branding those who were unsuccessful in this realm as failures (Redekop, 1969).

Perhaps the most significant factor in preserving the traditional Mennonite way of life came in the form of education for the young. Schooling was a tool for both socialization and protection from the outside world. Leaders of this population were convinced that the school was so intricately linked to their faith that if it was controlled by outside influences, the Mennonite religion and culture would collapse and be assimilated by the surrounding society (Quiring, 2003). It was this fear, after all, that was a factor in driving the ancestors of this population away from Manitoba when they felt government pressure to force public education on them. By ensuring that children were isolated from worldly influences, Low German Mennonites felt they were guaranteeing that their youth would not stray from the faith, something that would lead to the downfall of the individuals and eventually the group as a whole. Thus, school became an arena where Mennonite values would be passed on to the next generation in a secure, faith-based environment.

The basic structure of this educational system has not been altered since its inception in the 1920s (Gilmore, 2000). In fact, many of the educational traditions utilized date back to the model that originated in Russia and was later replicated in Canada. The focus on reproducing the Mennonite culture and lifestyle has remained intact for the past century. Schools pass on the gender-appropriate skills necessary for the adequate preparation of children for their agrarian futures. While boys concentrate on learning to make a living from the land, girls' education centres on aspects of the home and motherhood (Good Gingrich & Preibisch, 2010). Joint curriculum mandates reading and writing in the High German dialect that is employed in church services, basic arithmetic needed for cooking, sewing and farming, morals, cleanliness, prayer and song (Sawatzky, 1971; Gilmore, 2000; and Quiring, 2003). The methods of instruction involve rote memory work and utilize the Bible and other religious material in lessons. Ever-cognizant of their agricultural livelihoods, Low German Mennonites operate a six-month

school year (Sawatzky, 1971), freeing up children to help with farming activities during the most work-intensive times of the year. Homework is unheard of as children have ample chores at home that require their time and which encourage the development of skills that are deemed essential by the group. Tests are also seen as an imposition, something that would simply promote competition (Quiring, 2003), which is undesirable in a pacifist, communal society.

After either six (for girls) or seven (for boys) years of this formal Mennonite schooling, youth are deemed sufficiently trained for the manner in which they will live (Sawatzky, 1971). With their school years behind them, these individuals are considered young adults because "to further education beyond elementary level would retain the adolescent's status as a child" (Gilmore, 2000, p. 57). At this point, they are expected to assist their parents with the tasks for which they have been trained, honing their skills through practical application. Once they reach their late teens or early twenties, they are ready to marry and thus perpetuate the Mennonite cycle of raising a family in as simple and faithful a manner as possible.

Farming – Global Policies/Local Lives

It is this esteemed agrarian lifestyle that is opening Low German people up to cultural peril today, albeit not from the pressure of government attempts to assimilate them as in the past. Rather, it is the worldwide economy – and governments' involvement in it – that is instigating the threat to this group, most notably in Mexico. Mueller (2005) explains that while Mennonite movement back and forth between Mexico and Canada has occurred relatively consistently since the 1920s as people sought to visit relatives, the pace of migrations has accelerated significantly in the last thirty years. In addition, the migrations are more consistently in a northern direction or involve a circular pattern with trips back to Mexico as temporary visits or returns for the winter season. The permanent agrarian lifestyle preferred by the Low German Mennonites appears to be much less feasible in today's globalized world.

Global Economies vs. Local Livelihoods: The Mexican Experience

The main theories for this increased migration north place economics at the top of the list of contributing factors. The decade of the 1990's was seen as particularly difficult for this cultural group, as it was for other inhabitants of Mexico (Quiring, 2003). The circular migration pattern that Low German Mennonites partake in has been attributed to "increased globalization (in general) and the NAFTA (in particular), as agricultural prices in Mexico have decreased while the cost of living has increased" (Mueller, 2005, p. 38). Other factors that are seen to have a hand in the push towards Canada that this group experiences include the scarcity of available land in Mexico, drug and alcohol abuse, corruption, and drought and flooding issues (Castro, 2004; Mueller, 2005). The ties that such difficulties likely have to the economic realm simply reinforce the significance of the economy's role in the recent Mennonite departures from Mexico.

Along with other 'developing' countries, some of which Mennonites also inhabit, Mexico has come under the influence of neoliberal economic policies. Having accepted funding from International Financial Institutions (IFI) for well over half a century (see World Bank, 2011) they are subject to the stipulations these organizations set forth. For example, Structural Adjustment Program funding specifies the following measures for countries that utilize their funds: elimination of customs barriers; incentives to export; deregulation of prices; privatization; and public spending cuts (Gelinas, 2002, p. 110). Such policies dictate the adherence of receiving countries to the values of the free market system promoted by neoliberalism. Indeed, Mexico appears to be complying, to the extent that its own economy is impaired.

The combination of IFI policies and NAFTA regulations have influenced Mexico to move from its former mode of economic protectionism to a system in which open markets rule with little intervention from the Mexican state (Castro, 2004). Changes have occurred for people across the country as an estimated 1,750,000 people have been displaced, while poverty, malnutrition and school leaving rates have all increased (Carlsen, 2003). Impacts on agriculture, on which

Mennonite people within Mexico have depended since arriving in the 1920's, have been tremendous. Free trade has meant that Mexican products have been unable to compete with those from the United States and Canada, leading to a decrease in the prices of their products (Castro, 2004). Farmers in Mexico, therefore, are incapable of garnering profits from their labour.

This would not have impacted the Low German Mennonites who migrated to Mexico if their original intention of being wholly self-sufficient had been realized. Instead, environmental issues such as drought and flooding required this group to become reliant on the Mexican economy. Their inability to be completely self-sustaining caused Mennonites to be hindered by global neoliberal policies along with their Mexican counterparts. The resistance with which Mennonites in Mexico met advances or diversification in agricultural practices further impeded their capacity to maintain their rural livelihoods. Their consistent denial to modernize their practices compounded the economic plight in which Mennonite colonies found themselves. The demands by church leaders to adhere to the 'old ways' were sometimes seen as "an obsession" by some members of the faith (Guenther, 2004, p. 153). This fixation with remaining unchanged greatly contributed to the economic difficulties that the globalization of the agricultural industry brought with it.

For the Good of Family

Such economic strains put pressure on members of this group to finally alter their ways of living. Unable to move into other economic pursuits in Mexico, numerous Mennonites have decided to return to Canada to obtain employment. Immigration, having been described as "an ethical act of, and for, the family" (Suárez-Orozco, Darbes, Dias & Sutin, 2011), appears to have become the most reasonable option for many Mennonite parents. Rather than remain in Mexico and other nations where their agricultural lifestyles are becoming synonymous with severe poverty, Low German families are participating in an "uncontrolled migration" (Guenther, 2004; Good Gingrich & Preibisch, 2010) in a bid for family survival. These migrations are unsanctioned by the church, thereby forcing families to migrate independently. Consequently, concerns have arisen within the

group, particularly among church leaders, about an eventual demise of the Low German Mennonite culture and religion that have been painstakingly conserved for centuries.

Having retained their Canadian citizenship throughout the decades since their departure, the process of re-entry into their ancestors' homeland is greatly simplified. Mennonites whose parents and grandparents have ensured that citizenship was never revoked are able to obtain employment in the agricultural industry mainly in Ontario but increasingly in Manitoba and Alberta as well. Whereas in Mexico men were land-owners, they have been returning to Canada as land-labourers, now working for a wage (Gilmore, 2000). Because agricultural work is seasonal in nature, some families will remain in Canada for the season, returning to their Mexican colonies for the winter where they are able to live much more cheaply, thus enacting the circular pattern to their migration.

When Mennonite families find steady, long-term employment they often choose to stay in Canada on a more permanent basis, greatly reducing the frequency of the cyclical nature of the travels so common with this group. For these families, returning to Mexico simply becomes a trip to visit extended family, a holiday, or even to sell off their own farms 'back home'. Those who choose this route are quite possibly making a significant trade-off. In exchange for economic stability for their families, they are exposing themselves and their children to the worldly lifestyle that has been criticized and rejected by the church for generations. Working for a wage does not allow for Mennonites to remain physically separate from the world as they have traditionally. The fact that there is not enough available, inexpensive land for them to establish colonies on intensifies this new connection to their Canadian surroundings. Once detached from the outside world, Mennonites are now forced to find their way in an "unfamiliar, less autocratic, more industrialized, urban, consumer-oriented, religiously pluralistic society" (Guenther, 2004, p. 155) with a rather limited skill set. Having never been required to make decisions independently, Mennonite families are now faced with a multitude of choices, often making for a difficult transition into the Canadian lifestyle.

Educating Children as an Ethical Act

These choices, without fail, include those of an educational nature. Their mere presence within Alberta causes many school authorities to call for the inclusion of Low German Mennonite children in the school system. Parents, who themselves received the traditional Mennonite education in Latin America, are left to determine whether to permit their children to participate in formal education in Alberta. Concerned with both the traditions of the past and their children's opportunities for the future, parents who choose an educational path for their offspring could also be considered as engaging in an ethical act for the family. Do parents send their young to a public school in an attempt to give them the chance to become educated for a possible future in Canada? Or does their ethical stance persuade them to maintain control over their children's learning by attempting to preserve the Mennonite culture through more traditional educational structures? For those convinced of the need of salvation and the afterlife, beliefs that are quite prevalent in the Low German faith, this may actually seem the better option, especially since they don't seem to "buy into the mainstream's definition of advancement" (Gilmore, 2000, p. 124). In light of such questions, it becomes obvious that there are many factors that combine to muddy the waters of such a dilemma, which parents need to sort out for the benefit of their families.

Issues impacting decisions about education. To begin with, historical Mennonite beliefs clash with provincial legislation in regards to education. The effect of the Manitoban government's intention to assimilate them in the early 20th century is believed to have caused a negative view of Canadian education for both the Mennonites who departed and their offspring. It has been speculated that "the impact of the manner in which secular schools were imposed upon them in Canada was traumatic" (Sawatzky, 1971, p. 305), thus causing Low German Mennonites to pass their distrust of the Canadian education system on to each successive generation. This church-endorsed belief, along with the understanding that formal education is complete after six or seven years, comes into conflict with provincial legislation which mandates that all children between the ages of six and 16 participate in Albertan education in some form (*School Act,* Section

13(1)c).[1] Such legislation not only contrasts with customary Mennonite beliefs that minimal schooling is needed to prepare one for the future, however. It can also decrease a family's earning potential if children are required to be in school rather than working, thereby impacting a family's ability to care for themselves financially in their adopted land.

Cultural loss is another factor which can affect Mennonite parents' willingness to place their children in public schools in Alberta; one that is the basis of parental concerns over possible negative influences that their children may encounter in schools. Already fearful of Alberta's educational system, some Low German Mennonites are anxious about the possibility of losing their children to the outside world. Having been indoctrinated with the belief that physical separation from outsiders is essential for salvation (Gilmore, 2000), parents are reluctant to allow their own children access to a world that could, in their eyes, steal them away. Loss of language is also a logical concern that can impact culture, as it has been noted that immigrant children gravitate towards the language of their new home, resulting in the eventual demise of the native language over generations (Suárez-Orozco, Darbes, Dias & Sutin, 2011).

The experiences of discrimination faced by this cultural group, both in school and in greater Albertan society, create further hesitation in regards to decisions about schooling. While Low German Mennonites often share ancestral history with other Mennonite Canadians, they are often subjected to persecution due to the perception of Canadians that they are "not quite white" (Good Gingrich & Preibisch, 2010). Their determination to continue with their customary practices of dress and language in an effort to remain separate from the outside world at the same time exposes them as different within Albertan society, thus making them visible targets for discrimination by some Englishers[2].

[1] The minimum school leaving age will be increased to 17 with the anticipated proclamation of Alberta's new *Education Act*. See *Education Act*, Section 7(1)c for the details about compulsory education and Legislative Assembly of Alberta, 2012 for information regarding the Act coming into force.

[2] Low German Mennonites frequently refer to other Canadians as 'English' or 'Englishers' due to the language difference between the two groups. Information based on the author's experience.

Mennonite decisions about education are also impacted by the anti-agrarian neoliberal policies that pushed them out of their agricultural livelihoods in Mexico. The current knowledge economy effectively negates the traditional knowledge systems that Low German Mennonites have preserved over generations. The knowledge and skills that Mennonites have passed down over the years have little value in Canada. The ability to live off the land is not helpful if there is no land to live off of. Butchering and baking are useful, but certainly not necessary in Canada's pre-made, ready-to-consume society and are not seen as valuable skills that need to be instilled in the youth of today. Mennonite parents who disagree with this conception of education are likely more inclined to keep their children out of formal schooling in Alberta.

At the same time that the neoliberal-influenced educational system invalidates the knowledge that Low German Mennonites hold dear, it promotes its version of vital skills through demanding both accountability and testing to demonstrate the learning of students (Suárez-Orozco, Darbes, Dias & Sutin, 2011). The lack of both testing and competition in traditional Mennonite education contrasts sharply with this model, creating discomfort for Mennonite students who are made to perform and compete in this test-focused environment. As Low German Mennonites are commonly not even well-versed in reading and writing in their first language[3], testing them in this way serves to further ostracize them from the educational system, possibly persuading them to make a hasty retreat from formal education in Alberta.

In the Best Interests of Children

Without a grasp of the historical context of the Low German Mennonite experience, it would be remarkably easy for outsiders to assume that the best place for Mennonite children and youth is in Alberta's schools. By outlining the sacrifices made by the ancestors of these children for the express purpose of perpetuating their faith, this chapter has hinted at the complexities inherent in this study. The litany of migrations as a means of withstanding outside pressure has bred a unique and tenacious cultural identity for this group that one cannot help

[3] Information based on author's experiences.

but admire. It is, however, this identity that has been threatened by the impacts of world economics in recent decades. The simple, agrarian existence that has been preserved for generations by this group of Mennonites appears to no longer be feasible in today's 'developed' world. As such, Mennonite parents are left to determine what they feel is best for their individual families, in contrast to previous generations who relied on the guidance of the church. Those who choose to migrate north are then faced with the dilemma of how to educate the younger generations in this new society.

While it is often taken for granted that parents will do what is in the best interests of their children, it is vital to debate this assumption in an effort to consider what those best interests truly are. Using a critical children's rights framework as the basis for such a conversation places children at the very heart of the discussion. This approach then provides an arena for the voices of these children themselves to be heard in locations where decisions are being made for and about them. The next chapter works to provide a foundation with which to begin such a discussion.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW – EMPLOYING A CRITICAL CHILDREN'S RIGHTS FRAMEWORK

The commitment to locate this study on a foundation of children's rights stemmed from the desire to hear the perspectives of Low German Mennonite youth who are directly impacted by policies and decisions made by the adult world around them. Only through asking about their current life experiences can the realities that these youth face be understood and thus critiqued in their social and global contexts. The "general movement towards the recognition of children's rights" (Grover, 2004, p. 83) in the larger society makes this an ideal time to use children's rights literature and understandings as a lens with which to examine the data collected about such experiences. Additionally, employing a critical approach to the work allows for an enhanced understanding of the perspectives of youth and the aspects they reveal as helping or hindering their educational attainment. Opening this discussion with the importance of using children's perspectives in research will serve to highlight the significance of implementing critical children's rights as a framework.

Children's Perspectives in Research

Traditionally children have been viewed as "objects of study" (Grover, 2004, p. 84) in research rather than as active participants, due in part to the historical understandings of children as not "fully actualized" but as still developing beings (p. 91). Recently, however, children have been encouraged to become partners in educational research with their ideas and opinions being given greater weight. As Lincoln (1995) explains, "they are, in a very real sense, the primary stakeholders in their own learning processes" (p. 89) and should be afforded the opportunity to express their thoughts about their educational experiences. It has been found that through listening to children's perspectives, schools are able to improve school practices, thus enhancing learning and promoting a more democratic school environment (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2003; Lundy, 2007; Mitra, 2004). It is important that such opportunities for children are not merely tokenistic but genuinely seek to hear children's ideas and then act upon them where appropriate and applicable.

The growing acceptance of the validity of children's perspectives in educational studies is mirrored by those working in the area of child labour research. It is noted that working children "have unique knowledge and opinions about their situation that must be taken into consideration if measures to protect them are to succeed" (Myers & Boyden, 1998, p. 6; see also Leibel, 2004). Advocates of child-centred approaches to both education and work continue to encourage the inclusion of children in the research process. Such endeavours are backed by current, binding international regulations that make consulting with children about issues that concern them a legal obligation (see Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12; Lundy, 2007).

The importance of including children's perspectives in research is further reinforced by a heightened understanding of children as full, rights-holding citizens in society (see Fass, 2011; McGillivray, 2011; Howe & Covell, 2010). Viewing children on the basis of their humanity (Fass, 2011) ensures that their rights are equally as important as those of all other citizens. This impacts how children's perspectives in research are handled. Grover (2004) notes that "research participants at one level own their data in the same way that we own all our information; to have some control over how one is portrayed in the world by others is related to issues of human dignity" (p. 82). Acknowledging the dignity of young research participants recognizes the ownership they have to the stories and information they share through the research process. Seeing children in this way thus invokes the need to investigate their rights as members of society, both locally and internationally.

Prior to that discussion, however, the increased call for the inclusion of children's voice in research requires the recognition of particular understandings of research. Lincoln (1995) recommends the infusion of critical theory into research done with students as it "demands some focus on the structural elements of research participants' context: the history, economics, organizational, and class, race and gendered nature of that context" (p. 92). Therefore, a look at critical theory and how it will contribute to the children's rights framework utilized in this study is necessary at this point.

Critical Theory

This study draws on three "tasks" that critical theory is seen to have in research: understanding, critique, and education (Deetz and Kersten as cited in Foster, 1986, p. 73). As this research stemmed from the desire to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of Low German Mennonite youth as they relate to education, the first task of critical theory was vital to this cause. Using a critical framework allows the researcher to delve into the question 'what is going on in this situation?' Attempting to fully comprehend the educational experiences of this particular group of youth requires the recognition that those experiences are not limited merely to time spent in classrooms. Rather, critical theory acknowledges that all experiences are contextual in nature. It recognizes the need to appreciate the "historical situatedness in relation to current context" (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 166). In the case of the educational experiences of Low German Mennonite youth, critical theory would call for an in-depth understanding of the cultural histories that have influenced the lives and identities of the participants to this point. Aspects of history, culture, faith, language, family ties, traditions, occurrences of discrimination, prior schooling, and work can impact the schooling experiences of the study participants. A full assessment of the historical situatedness of Mennonite youth presently living in Alberta was provided in Chapter 2 of this document and touches on the many factors that come into play when considering the lived experiences of this particular group.

This barrage of influences highlights the complexity that is involved in researching any social issue. Individuals are greatly affected by the world around them (both presently and historically) and vice versa. McLaren (2009) states that the individual and society are "inextricably interwoven" (p. 61). It is because of this interdependent state that lived experiences must be studied in light of their complex social contexts. Critical theory maintains that there are not just two sides to a question but a multitude of sides that are "linked to certain class, race, and gender issues" (McLaren, 2009, p. 62). It is the critical researcher's task, then, to "attack this complexity" (Kinchloe, McLaren & Steinberg, 2012, p. 21) by asking relevant, probing questions which shed light on the many facets of people's lives.

Such questioning gives rise to the second task of critical research. Once researchers have gained an understanding of the complexities of the issue being assessed, they are better positioned to offer critiques of that situation. Here critique does not necessarily involve criticism; rather it focuses on raising legitimate questions about what is going on (Foster, 1986) based on the information gathered through the research process. Questions concerning educational access, student and/or parental choice in education, and labour legislation for children and youth arise out of the data derived from this study and require serious, critical contemplation. Critical theory ensures that such questions are not considered outside of the cultural and societal contexts that these youth are a part of.

Those contexts reveal how Low German Mennonites may be disenfranchised in Albertan society, giving rise to another important aspect of critical work. McLaren (2009) points out that there are some forms of knowledge and understanding that have "more power and legitimacy than others" (p. 63). In Alberta the dominant form of knowledge has been taught to children for generations through the provincial curriculum that has helped to shape the social, economic, and political structures that currently exist. In comparison, the knowledge that has been passed down through Low German Mennonite school systems during that same period appears to hold very little weight in the current lives of Mennonite youth in this province. As indicated in Chapter 2, preparation for a simple, agrarian lifestyle is not terribly relevant to life in Alberta. This reinforces the (perhaps mistaken) notion that the dominant ideals of education are the correct ones and makes it permissible to devalue Mennonite forms of knowledge, thus placing this cultural group in an inferior position in society. Critical researchers attempt to reposition themselves so that they can "see the world through the eyes of the dispossessed and act against the ideological and institutional processes and forms that reproduce oppressive conditions" (Apple, Au & Gandin, 2009, p. 3). By doing so, researchers can reveal the legitimacy of the knowledge that Mennonites hold, while at the same time examining complications that arise because of it.

Ironically, the view of traditional Mennonite education and cultural beliefs as valid in Alberta is supported when it serves a particular agenda. Upholding the customary Mennonite perception of education, either by Mennonites themselves or by those in the larger Albertan society, can support the practice of exempting Mennonite children out of school, often for the purposes of channeling them into an inexpensive, vulnerable labour force. Here critical theory can be used to critique this practice, citing the possible negative impacts it can have on youth presently and into the future. This may seem to be contradictory. While critical theory showcases the validity of a traditional form of knowledge on one hand, on the other it highlights the lack of legitimacy of a practice that is built upon it. This form of research has never proposed to give clear answers. It simply works to expose the complexities that are inherent in any social issue, as in the case of education for Low German Mennonite youth in Alberta.

As noted earlier, education is the final task of critical theory. In this instance education refers to the broader society, not simply schooling for children. Critical theory makes a "distinction between what is and what should be" (Giroux, 2009, p. 28). Describing the schooling experiences of Mennonite youth in the light of the many complex and interrelated factors that influence it is not enough. Critical research demands more. Shields (2012) reports that "critical research begins with the premise that research's role is not to describe the world as it is, but also to demonstrate what needs to be changed" (p. 3).

In this light, research that "aspires to the name 'critical' must be connected to an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society or public sphere within the society" (Kinchloe, McLaren & Steinberg, 2012, p. 16). Mennonite youth have to date been assumed to be marginalized and to lack power in their own lives as is evidenced in the findings of this study. Although this research reveals that they also have more agency than initially believed, the lack of privilege they experience as compared to many of their non-Mennonite peers indicates that their social position does serve to disenfranchise them to a certain extent. Critical theory works to empower such marginalized individuals to "transcend the constraints placed on them by race, class, and gender" (Creswell,

2009, p. 62) through the critique of the society in which they find themselves (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Those doing critical research "seek to produce practical, pragmatic knowledge that is cultural and structural, judged by its degree of historical situatedness and its ability to produce praxis or action" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 160).

The goal of both individual participant empowerment and that of the group as a whole is a driving force for this research, with the intention of providing greater understanding for those who strive to assist Low German Mennonite youth in achieving their educational goals. Using critical theory as an advocacy lens (Creswell, 2009) does not provide free reign to the researcher though. The

> challenge is to conduct research with as much independence, credibility, rigor, and discipline as possible, but then once one has drawn some conclusions, to take on the role of activist and ensure that the findings are not only understood but, where appropriate, acted upon. This is quite different from taking an activist or advocacy position up front and selecting respondents, cases, or variables *in order to prove a point* (Shields, 2012, p. 11, emphasis in the original).

While this particular work does intend to peer through that advocacy lens, the use of critical theory tempers that desire by ensuring that the educational experiences of Low German Mennonite youth are looked at in relation to the other factors that are present in the lives of these individuals.

Children's Rights

Until recently, research about and involving children's rights has lacked this critical lens. It has been noted that "in almost every social science discipline researchers are now addressing children's issues in their respective fields from a rights perspective" (Quennerstedt, 2013, p. 234), yet the research itself has engaged in a low level of theorizing (Reynaert, Bouverne-De Bie & Vandevelde, 2009; Quennerstedt, 2013). Instead of focusing on the task of critiquing circumstances, children's rights research has revolved around the conception of rights, the legal implications of children's rights legislation, and how such internationally-binding agreements should be implemented (Quennerstedt, 2013;

Reynaert, Bouverne-De Bie & Vandevelde, 2012). It is argued that such discussions have taken the place of theory in research, aiding in the decontextualization of children's rights in research. The use of a critical children's rights framework has been proposed as a way of countering this pattern and thus recontextualizing children's rights by examining them in the local context in which children exist and thus experience their rights (Reynaert et al., 2012; Quennerstedt, 2010, 2013).

While specific examples of the use of a critical children's rights framework in research are still somewhat difficult to find in the literature (see Hemphill & Schneider, 2013 as one example), this approach to research has the potential to shift discussions of children's rights. Such a framework is essential for studying the educational experiences of Low German Mennonite youth. Every part of life – school, work, family – hinges on the fundamental rights of the individuals represented in and by the study. As such, looking at their school lives in the context of their larger experiences is vital and can only be done with a critical lens. It is from this theoretical background that the compiled data can be assessed and critiqued.

Prior to such an appraisal, however, the larger body of literature addressing children's rights must be discussed. Particularly relevant are those international policies that drive discussions about children's value and place in society and the rights that are inherent in their very existence as human beings. Those rights are debated and discussed throughout the literature in regards to all aspects of children's lives. This deliberation, however, limits the scope to both education and labour concerns, as they are the most pertinent to this study.

What Are Children's Rights? International Definitions and Legislation

The principal document in relation to children's rights on the international scene is that of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereafter referred to as the Convention, the UNCRC, or the CRC), which was drafted in 1989. The Convention outlines the general definition of a child in Article 1, stating that "every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier" (UNCRC,

Article 1). That definition would be in accordance with federal Canadian law and thus, the participants of this study who all fall under the age of majority in this country.

The various articles that are outlined in the CRC fall under three main categories of rights, those of provision, protection, and participation (Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children, 2002, p. 4).[4] Along with these three classifications of rights, the CRC denotes four principles which are intended to guide interpretations of the Convention: the best interests of the child; non-discrimination; life, survival and development; and participation (Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children, 2002, p. 6).

Of chief concern for this particular work is the "best interests of the child" principle which is outlined in Article 3 of the CRC and reads as follows:

> In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration (UNCRC, Article 3(1)).

It is this principle in particular that is being used as the lens for analysis in this study because of the way in which it places the child at the heart of any decisions that impact him/her. By focusing on what is best for children, their innate human dignity is recognized and given value.

The significance of the wording in this article cannot be overlooked in this discussion as it has bearing on how the Convention is interpreted during the implementation process. Even though the best interests of the child are touted as a primary consideration in actions made concerning a child, it is "not *the* primary consideration which means that other primary considerations can also be taken into account" (Howe & Covell, 2010, p. 21). Additionally, the CRC does not provide a specific definition of what those best interests might be. Although this has the potential to create controversy or confusion when attempting to enact the Convention, the slightly ambiguous nature of the article does serve to provide a

[4] Although the description of these articles as rights is currently being debated with the "3 p's" being dubbed a "pedagogical tool" rather than a categorization system (see Quennerstedt, 2010, p. 621), this is typically how these rights are discussed in the literature.

baseline procedure to follow when dealing with children's rights. At the same time, it leaves room for interpretation, which allows for the Convention's implementation in various nations around the globe that don't necessarily have aligned views of children or laws that protect them. This reveals the contextual nature of the CRC in that it is intended to be adaptable, and thus applicable, to various situations and circumstances. It does, however, remain a binding document for those who have ratified it. This means that Canada, as a signatory since 1991, is required to comply with the measures as outlined in the document, utilizing the four principles to interpret and implement it in the national context according to Canada's own laws. Prior to engaging with the articles of the CRC that focus on education and labour, it is helpful to pause and consider how children's rights and what is in their best interests have been understood traditionally.

Historical (mis)understandings of children's rights. "Best interests of the child" have historically been "based simply on what parents or adult authorities thought best for children – the traditional paternalistic conception of best interests" (Howe & Covell, 2010, p. 20). This aligns with previous understandings of children as those who do not have rights or are, at most, holders of "rights-in-trust" that come into fruition upon reaching adulthood (Feinberg, 2007, p. 112). The notion of a sheer lack of rights comes from society's historical view of the child as not wholly formed, as presented earlier in the literature addressing the lack of children's perspectives in research. The traditional theme of "the child as victim rather than person" further supported this belief and is evident even in classical literary pieces (Freeman, 1987-88, p. 301). Such understandings of children reinforced the idea that they were essentially incapable and therefore must be *decided for* rather than *have a say in* any dealings that impacted them.

This image of children has repeatedly played into arguments opposing children's rights both presently and throughout history. Freeman (1987-88) discussed two myths that have been used to discredit the need or capacity of children to be rights-bearing citizens. The first "idealizes the adult-child relations" (p. 302) and claims that adults will consistently work for the best interests of

children. He surmised that this results in a "laissez-faire attitude toward the family" and that the only right that children have "is the right to autonomous parents" (Freeman, 1987-88, p. 302). The second myth perceives childhood as the "golden age, the best years of our life" (Freeman, 1987-88, p. 302). This viewpoint suggests that childhood is equated with innocence and that children should be able to play freely while being spared the stresses and concerns of adult life. Both of these myths make presumptions about the realities of children's lives and serve to negate the need for their rights to even be considered, let alone upheld.

The 'rights-in-trust' theory attempted to address children's rights in regards to the future utilizing education to illustrate its necessity. Feinberg (2007) declared that a child has the right to "have future options kept open until he is a fully formed self-determining adult capable of deciding among them" (p. 113). In this view, education is a means of ensuring that those alternatives are left open for the child. By teaching students a variety of skills and by introducing them to various choices in life, it is believed that education better prepares them for a diverse array of occupational options for which they have both ability and interest.

This idea is also represented by Dworkin's 'future-oriented consent' in which

> the child would eventually appreciate the reason for the restriction imposed upon him (or her), and would have agreed with it if he (or she) knew then what he (or she) knows now that he (or she) is a rationally autonomous adult (Dworkin as discussed in Freeman, 1987-88, p. 310).

This led Freeman to develop the hypothetical question that he believed should be considered when dealing with children's issues:

> what sort of action or conduct would we wish, as children, to be shielded against on the assumption that we would want to mature to a rationally autonomous adulthood and be capable of deciding on our own system of ends as free and rational beings? (Freeman, 1987-88, p. 310)

All of these notions put great stock in the importance of protecting children's future opportunities, which is indeed a vital aspect of children's rights

and is upheld in the Convention (see *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Article 29(1)). However, by charting rights simply by how infringements upon them now will impact a child's future endeavours stops short of the true measure of children's rights. This understanding works to invalidate children's worth as full, rights-bearing members of society today by placing significance solely on their future selves. Rather, children must be seen as valuable for who they are now, as well as who they will become in the future.

Continuing confusion about children's rights. Those who speak out in support of children's full rights – both current rights and those 'in-trust' – are frequently met with the response that giving children the space and voice to claim their rights will result in mayhem. McGillivray described this in a response directed at Purdy's (1994a) assertion that equal rights are not in the best interests of children. McGillivray (1994) maintained that

> [Purdy] conflates children's rights with children's liberation. She pictures autonomy, not in terms of respect and freedom of will and connection with the collectivity, but as an improbable license to do what you want freed of any sort of relational or situational constraint. This is not what either rights or children's rights is about (p. 245).

While Purdy denies that this is what is meant by her thesis (see Purdy, 1994b), McGillivray's statement highlights common misconceptions of what children's rights actually entail. The belief that rights are somehow associated with unbridled freedom gives rise to an understanding of children's rights as providing absolute autonomy for children and thus chaos for their caregivers. It is this misinterpretation of children's rights that creates controversy about the issue. The idea that rights are equivalent to individualistic autonomy is a dominant feature of literature surrounding children's rights, with some writers advising caution when "abandoning children to their autonomy" (Hafen & Hafen, 1996, title). Tension between children and their caregivers can also be created by this notion of rights as it sets up a win-lose scenario where the gain of rights on the part of children calls for parental loss of control or authority (Reynaert et al., 2009). Such a view leads some to question the validity of children's rights overall.

As McGillivray (1994) states, though, by not acknowledging the rights of children, "their status, however benevolent their treatment, is that of slaves, others, outsiders who are not 'us'. This creates a gap which invites exploitation and abuse" (p. 247). The positions of power in relation to children that adults find themselves in can result in children being shielded from public view (Minow, 1987) where they then become not just inferior but invisible as well. Uncovering these children (Shultz, 2008) and thus filling McGillivray's gap requires viewing children not just in terms of their childhood but recognizing that children "need to be treated in their full humanity and not just as subordinate and dependent subjects" and that it is "their humanity, not their childhood," to which they have a right (Fass, 2011, p. 23).

Evolving understandings of the rights of children. Creating more accurate and reasonable assessments of what children's rights entail is necessary for ensuring that children's humanity is respected and highly regarded within society. Allowing rights to stand for individualism without challenge moves children's rights into an abstract realm of legalese and serves to decontextualize discussions regarding them (Reynaert et al., 2009). Since this simply puts an end to dialogue about rights (Nedelsky, 1993; Reynaert et al., 2009), it is important to reframe our notions of children's rights, in order to keep discussions going.

While autonomy is certainly an aspect of rights, the way in which autonomy is currently viewed is problematic in light of rights discourse. People frequently take an individualistic view of autonomy. Rights are seen as a way of protecting one's interests, leading to the interpretation that rights separate individuals so they can fully embrace what is theirs. That version of autonomy is called into question by Nedelsky (1993) who claimed that "what makes autonomy possible is not separation, but relationship" (p. 8). Here autonomy is seen as the ability to govern oneself rather than simply maintain one's individual freedoms. This capacity to self-govern actually pulls individuals into relationship with one another, for if there were no relationships to concern themselves with, there would be little need to regulate oneself. Such a view of autonomy is particularly critical

in a culture such as the Low German Mennonite population where community holds a central position in daily life.

This understanding of autonomy as hinging on relationships *between* rather than protection *from* paints a different picture of what rights truly are. In this case, rights structure relationships and bind individuals to one another. This "affirms a particular kind of community" that is committed to promoting open dialogue that allows "suppressed points of view to be heard, to make covert conflict overt" (Minow, 1987, p. 1881). This connects rights directly to the specific contexts in which people experience rights in their day-to-day existence. It is in these contexts where rights are thus debated, negotiated, and acted upon.

"Rights, then, are about relationship" (McGillivray, 2011, p. 24). Children's rights, in this case, become less about freedom and more about gaining autonomy with the support of those around them. In learning how to govern themselves, Low German Mennonite youth become better equipped to live within their own cultural community while still being able to adapt to life within the larger society where they eventually need to make decisions for themselves. This view of autonomy acknowledges that children's rights are simply human rights, tailored to the realities of children and which should be a "shared responsibility between children and adults" (Reynaert et al., 2012, p. 163). It is these rights that work to support the human dignity of children that the Convention strives to uphold.

Education and the CRC

In doing so, the Convention addresses a gamut of rights that need to be protected for the sake of children's humanity. Education comes into play in Article 28 of the Convention, which discusses the right to education and outlines how governments are expected to provide for children's rights in this area. Within the article, there are three required government actions that are particularly pertinent to this study:

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall in particular:

(a) Make primary education compulsory and available for free to all;

(b) Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need;

(e) Take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates (*Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Article 28(1)).

Although the outlined actions are relatively self-explanatory, the contextual nature of the Convention calls for consideration of the article in light of the Canadian situation. The most significant aspect to note is that while Canada is bound to the CRC on the basis of being a signatory to it, education actually falls under provincial jurisdiction. This has the potential to create tensions when working to implement these measures. While one level of government is responsible for providing for children's education, another level is being held accountable to the Convention for that provision. If the educational values of these two levels experience dissonance, a problem could arise.

Within Alberta, education is outlined in the *School Act*, which is soon to be replaced with the *Education Act* (see Legislative Assembly of Alberta, 2012). The *Act* dictates all aspects of schooling within the province, providing legislation about students, teachers, schools, governance, and all other matters associated with education. Therefore, it is the document that one would look to when considering how children's rights are either enacted or infringed upon in the context of education and will come into play in the discussion of the study data.

Children's Rights in Relation to Work

Sometimes when a child's right to education is in jeopardy it is a result of his/her perceived need to work. To further complicate matters, there are many factors that come into play in regards to child labour: poverty, early school leaving, and gender roles. These aspects cannot be looked upon as hierarchical or

completely causal in relation to child labour, however. Rather, they are cyclical and organic, both impacting on and being impacted upon one another. As such, it becomes important to look at all such aspects of child labour in light of the laws that attempt to regulate children's work and the beliefs that either perpetuate it or strive to abolish it.

Article 32 of the CRC draws international attention to the realities of working children and outlines responsibilities to which governments are held accountable. The article reads as follows:

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.
2. States Parties shall take legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to ensure the implementation of the present article. To this end, and having regard to the relevant provisions of other international instruments, States Parties shall in particular:
    (a) Provide for a minimum age or minimum ages for employment;
    (b) Provide for appropriate regulation of the hours and conditions of employment;
    (c) Provide for appropriate penalties or sanctions to ensure the effective enforcement of the present article (*Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Article 32).

This particular article does not stand alone in terms of international legislation regarding child labour. The International Labour Organization (ILO) Minimum Age Convention No. 138 also delivers international guidelines to the realm of child labour and provides more specific guidelines for member states, of which Canada is one (Canadian Foundation for Labour Rights, 2013). While Canada has not ratified this particular document (UFCW, 2009), it is an important piece of international legislation that is frequently looked to in discussions of child labour. Convention 138 legislates that the age of completion of compulsory schooling in a particular place should also serve as the minimum age for entry

into the workforce (*C138 – Minimum Age Convention*, Article 2(3)). Barring that, the age of 15 years is the starting point for legal work for children, unless ILO member states can provide a reason why that age should be lowered to 14 years (*C138 – Minimum Age Convention*, Article 2(4)). Through this legislation young workers are further protected from work that "by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out is likely to jeopardize the health, safety or morals of young persons" until the age of 18 years (*C138 – Minimum Age Convention*, Article 3(1)). However, allowances are made for children between the ages of 13 to 15 years to engage in light work, making it very clear that such employment must not prejudice young workers school attendance or harm their health or development (*C138 – Minimum Age Convention*, Article 7(1a,1b)).

Just as in education, labour laws within Canada fall under provincial jurisdiction meaning that Article 32 of the CRC and any other international legislation must be viewed in accordance with provincial legislation. The *Employment Standards Code* serves to legislate labour within Alberta, including work performed by children and youth. It states that children under the age of 12 are not permitted to engage in paid work (Alberta Federation of Labour, 2011). Adolescents (those between the ages of 12 and 14 years) are prohibited from working during school hours and may only work two hours on a school day in specific occupations (*Employment Standards Code*, Section 65(1); Alberta Federation of Labour, 2011).

While these standards don't fully comply with the Minimum Age Convention, they are intended to protect young people in Alberta workplaces. However, "restrictions on child employment do not apply to most farm and ranch employees" (Commission for Labour Cooperation, 2011, p. 2). The *Employment Standards Code* exempts "primary agricultural operations" from the status of employer (*Employment Standards Code*, Section 138(1)), thus excluding farm workers from the protections that the *Code* provides (Barnetson, 2009a). Because of this loophole, children are currently able to obtain employment in the agricultural sector in Alberta. Even though the *Code* dictates that only primary agricultural operations (generally understood to be family farms) are exempt, Low

German Mennonite youth often find themselves working not just on privately-owned farms, but in agricultural production facilities as well (Gilmore, 2000).

Realities of farm work. Agriculture, while essentially exempt from employment regulations in this province, is considered by some to be "the most unsafe workplace in Alberta" (Barnetson, 2013, title). Even so, reliable data regarding injuries and fatalities to children on farms are hard to obtain (Barnetson, 2009a). Separating out which incidents involved hired child labour versus the children of farm-owners is even more difficult. Nonetheless, reports "support the observation that children and youth on Canadian farms and ranches are at high risk for fatal and serious agricultural injuries" (Canadian Agricultural Injury Surveillance Program, 2007, p. 1). It is not only specific accidents that can cause harm to children however. Exposure to chemicals can inflict both short- and long-term damage to the developing minds and bodies of young people while repetitive motions can result in pain and injuries as youth age. Coupled with working in extreme temperatures with poor sanitation facilities, these features of agricultural work can result in uncomfortable and potentially harmful work conditions for children and youth (Coursen-Neff, 2010).

In spite of the dangers inherent in agricultural labour, this is the sector in which 69% of children find work (International Labour Office, 2010, p. 56). This is not limited to 'developing' countries as some would likely assume. An ILO report stated that agriculture "remains an employer of child labour in those OECD countries which have not ratified Convention No. 138" (International Labour Organization, 2010, p. 56) of which Canada is one. Even as a ratifying country of the International Labour Organization's Convention No. 182 (also known as the Worst Forms of Child Labour), Canada continues to allow the employment of children on its farms and agricultural facilities. Convention No. 182's definition of hazardous child labour as that which "jeopardizes the physical, mental or moral well-being of a child, either because of its nature or because of the conditions in which it is carried out" (International Labour Organization, 2002, p. 9) would definitely apply to this industry.

Poverty and working children. And yet, children continue to engage in occupational tasks that are potentially dangerous and unhealthy. It is without doubt that many children and youth who take on work as farm labourers do so out of necessity in a bid to help themselves and/or their families financially. By bringing paycheques home, youth are contributing to the family income, thus creating a higher quality of life for the family unit. The merits of child labour, in addition to aiding the economic survival of the family, need to be considered and contrasted with the dangers that poor children are facing in the workplace.

The child's right to work. There are some who wish to celebrate other advantages of employment that working children are presumed to profit from. Work is seen as a means of increasing self-esteem, respect, and position within the family (see Liebel, 2004; Myers & Boyden, 1998; Bequele & Boyden, 1988; Nieuwenhuys, 1996; Fyfe, 1993). Even the ILO concedes that many types of work can be helpful for children by "providing them with experience and technical skills" (International Labour Organization, 2011, p. 21). In this light, work is believed to be a way of promoting the best interests of children (Myers & Boyden, 1998). As children become integral to their own upkeep and experience increased social participation, they are afforded "greater weight in the 'world of grown-ups'" (Liebel, 2004, p. 7) leading to the enhanced self-esteem and importance within the family that are championed.

These ideas have influenced a call for the protection of children's right to work. Proponents suggest that current beliefs about child labour "stereotype working children as helpless victims" (Myers & Boyden, 1998, p. 12) and work against positive forms of children's work in the bid to end exploitative child labour. They maintain that it is the failure of society to fully recognize children's contributions to the production of value that makes children vulnerable to exploitation rather than child labour itself (Nieuwenhuys, 1996).

Interestingly, while making claims that work is "a critical influence on the growth and development of perhaps most of the world's children" (Myers & Boyden, 1998, p. 5) and that children gain necessary skills from working, some child work advocates admit that the work children generally do is not valued in

and of itself: “One common feature of child labour is its concentration on unskilled and simple routines which offer little opportunities for transfer to other, more remunerative, safer or more interesting occupations” (Bequele & Boyden, 1988, p. 6). Nieuwenhuys (1996) contributes to this by adding that children’s work is generally considered inferior and that “inferiority is not only attached to the nature of the work but to the person who performs it as well” (p. 243). If the very work that a child undertakes in order to become more credible in turn discredits that individual due to the nature of the work itself, it raises questions about whether the other extolled virtues of child work are even realized.

Another issue arises in the train of thought presented by these authors regarding the amount of time that children spend at work. Much of the discussion in the arena of child labour focuses on work that demands large portions of a child’s day and either prejudices their educational attendance or negatively impacts their health (International Labour Office, 2010). The arguments presented in support of children’s work in the manner described above seem to be geared towards that end as well. However, at one point, Myers & Boyden (1998) mention that there are “studies which found the school performance of working children (especially those working about 5-10 hours per week) to be superior to that of their peers who do not work at all” (p. 15). While such studies are not cited by the authors (yet do exist – see Bushnik, 2003; McNeal, 1997), this notion seems to place the argument in an entirely different category than previously believed. The belief that moderate workloads can improve children’s esteem and possibly even their performance at school is not necessarily in dispute. The problem lies in those instances where work becomes the key aspect to a child’s life due to financial circumstances, a distinction that is not made clear in the arguments above.

It is here where it becomes necessary to consider whether all young people have equal opportunity and/or the choice to work or if those from low-income families face increased pressure to enter the workforce earlier (Shultz & Taylor, 2006) and with heavier workloads. Bushnik (2003) outlines that a moderate work schedule is considered to occupy a child from one to 20 hours per week, with moderate-to-heavy loads consisting of work between 20 and 30 hours. Heavy

workloads are those that take up 30 or more hours per week of a young person's time and have greater bearing on school drop-out rates in Canada (pp. 10-11). Asking if all children have the right to take on heavy workloads during their school years is not unreasonable in a debate about child workers and will be taken up further in Chapter 6.

There is no dispute about the negative effects that poverty can have on "student behaviour, achievement, and retention in school" (Ferguson, Bovaird & Mueller, 2007), leading some to suggest that "it is in the best interests of children living in poverty and low income families to enjoy their right to education on the basis of equal opportunity" (Howe & Covell, 2010, p. 26) rather than focus on the right to work. Education has been shown to have a "compensatory effect, buffering the effects of poverty and reducing the achievement gap between low and high income students" (Howe & Covell, 2010, p. 26). This effect cannot take place when children are absent from the classroom and heading to the workplace in order to make up the income differential. Instead, it is believed that increased social assistance, such as child benefits, affordable housing, and higher quality early learning programs, would do much to alleviate the symptoms of poverty (Shultz & Taylor, 2006) and still allow for poor children to access education at the same rate as their more affluent peers.

Early school leaving. Currently that access in Alberta is hindered by the continued presence of child labour which appears to influence provincial drop-out rates and vice versa. It is the proverbial chicken/egg dilemma when trying to comprehend the relationship between work and early school leaving. Do students leave school with the intention of entering the workforce? Do current work obligations influence students to eventually abandon their education due to a lack of time to put concentrated efforts into their schoolwork, resulting in low grades and/or loss of interest? Both of these instances are probably realistic accounts of what happens when young people leave school prior to graduation.

A surprising number of students do choose to leave. Approximately 20% of Alberta's students fail to complete high school five years after beginning Grade 10 (Alberta Education, 2009, p. 1; United Way of Calgary and Area, 2010, p. 15).

This is a spot where the cyclical and intertwined relationships between the factors impacting child labour come into view even more clearly. Youth from low-income households make up a large portion of that drop-out rate (United Way of Calgary and Area, 2010, p. 12; Ferguson, Bovaird & Mueller, 2007). An American study that noted that farmworker youth drop out of school at 4 times the national average (Coursen-Neff, 2010, p. 14) would suggest that a significant number of Alberta's agricultural child workers also contribute to the statistics on early school leavers. Considering that the drop-out figure of 20% does not include students who have never been registered in the provincial school system or who have left school before Grade 10 (Alberta Education, 2009, p. 4) creates further concern. An estimated drop-out rate of 58% for students in one southern Alberta K-12 school with an extremely high Low German Mennonite population (Dempster, 2013, October 7) reveals that provincial measures of high school drop-out rates are inadequate. It is very likely that a provincial drop-out rate of 20% does not do justice to the actual experiences of Low German Mennonite youth in the area of education.

Nevertheless, there is little doubt that many youth are leaving school without a high school diploma in hand. One estimate claimed that about 9000 Albertan students drop out of school each year (United Way of Calgary and Area, 2010, p. 15), contributing to Alberta's status as a province with one of the highest drop-out rates in the country (Statistics Canada and Council of Ministers of Education Council, 2010, p. 36). There is irony to this dubious position for two reasons. The first stems from the fact that Alberta's education system is often touted as being one of the best not just in the country, but in the world (Alberta Education, 2013). Yet, it is failing a full 1/5 of its youth. Some would argue that these youth are not being failed but are in fact consciously leaving their educations behind in favour of working in Alberta's strong economy.

Here is where the second bit of irony reveals itself. While individuals often succeed in obtaining work upon exiting school, it is generally high school dropouts who are first released from their jobs when economic woes arise. In the last economic downturn it was noted that the unemployment rate of drop-outs was

more than double that of high school graduates who were not enrolled in post-secondary institutions, 18.0% compared to 8.4% (Gilmore, 2010, November, Section 9). Not only do early school leavers experience decreased job security but their overall earning potential is lower as well. For instance, in 2009/2010, drop-outs were working nearly one hour more per week than working high school graduates but earned $70 less in the same timeframe ($551 versus $621) (Gilmore, 2010, November, Section 10). If that gap were to continue over a lifetime, early school leavers would earn considerably less on average than their more highly educated counterparts.

These differences do not just affect the drop-outs themselves but have impacts on society more broadly. It has been calculated that each student who drops out of school costs taxpayers more than $15,000 per year in terms of health care, social assistance, crime, earning loss, and lost tax revenue (United Way of Calgary and Area, 2010, p. 16). Such a figure shows that youth employment can have far-reaching implications if it serves to encourage students to exit school early. The short-terms gains that youth, their families, and their employers experience through their work may not even come close to recouping the losses that they may very well encounter in their adult years.

The cultural/gender gap. Both child labour and school drop-out rates are affected by gender, particularly in the case of Low German Mennonite youth. Culturally, women are seen as the weaker sex and are expected to fulfill that role in specific ways, mainly as a wife and mother. Responsible for childbearing, childrearing, housework and specific chores outside the home, women are seen to be silent helpers to their husbands whose primary obligation is to "bear as many children as God allows" (Kulig, Babcock, Wall & Hill, 2009, p. 11). The large families that result often mean that Mennonite mothers need assistance in caring for younger children and taking care of household chores, tasks which usually fall to older daughters. This may be seen not only as a benefit to Mennonite women but as a training opportunity for girls' futures as wives and mothers. Because of the pressure to assist at home and take on the traditional feminine roles of the culture, teenage girls are often obligated to abandon their educations.

In order to keep women "within a domestic sphere" (Kulig, Babcock, Wall & Hill, 2009, p. 11), the knowledge to which they are exposed is limited. This serves to perpetuate the cultural gender roles and the authority of men. This customary withholding of information from females also makes it difficult for girls to access education as doing so goes against the cultural norms to which they and their parents have been socialized.

In addition to their domestic expectations, female adolescents are frequently sent to work outside of the home in a seasonal capacity in order to contribute to the household income, further hindering their ability to attend school. Boys also find themselves contributing in this way. As such, the limits on education here relate not so much to gender but to culture as both sexes are expected to contribute to the family financially. The patriarchal structure of the culture does place greater importance on males, however. This does not result in boys having greater success in attending school though. Rather, it means that males and females are encouraged to leave school for different reasons. While girls are expected to assist at home, honing domestic skills, boys are encouraged to obtain employment and learn how to provide for one's future family of which they will one day be the "direct power-holder" (Gilmore, 2000, p. 49). Being aware of these specific gender roles is essential in bringing about a deeper understanding of the lived contexts in which Low German Mennonite youth exist and attempt to access education.

Critical Children's Rights

The critical children's rights framework outlined in this chapter provides a base for the analysis and discussion of the research data that is to come. Centering the study on children's rights focuses the lens directly on the experiences of the youth involved in the research. Critical theory then allows for the circumstances that impact these children to be critiqued and brought to light. The infringement of rights that Low German Mennonite youth encounter, in work, education, and society in general, can be revealed and discussed through the use of this framework, ultimately leading to a greater understanding of how those rights can

be protected and respected by all members of society. With the framework for the study laid down, the intricacies of building the study can now be described.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY – STRUCTURING THE STUDY

The aim of this study was to gain an understanding of how Low German Mennonite youth perceive success in education and the factors that they believed helped or hindered their attainment of that success. Because of the desire to acquire the unique perspectives of individuals within this cultural group, it was imperative that this research be of a qualitative nature. Semi-structured interviews became the tool of choice in ensuring that the data gathered represented the distinct views of the participants. Having centred the study in the constructivist paradigm which upholds the belief that realities are socially constructed and therefore numerous and varying, it was important that the participants' views were sought and that their voices were given weight. These details, along with the many other aspects of the study and its structure and implementation are outlined further in this chapter.

Methodology

In embracing a qualitative approach for this research, I accepted the belief that people are "active creators of their world" (Sarantakos, 2005, p. 41). The ontological assumption that reality is constructed by individuals in relationship with the world around them (Paul, Graffam & Fowler, 2005; Lincoln, 2005) thus provides the foundation for this research. Rather than seeing reality as simply the events or circumstances that people encounter, constructivism recognizes that individuals make meaning of and through those events, thus constructing their own understandings of the world. Providing participants with the opportunity to speak of their experiences in their own contexts allowed me to have greater access to, and understanding of their individual realities.

By accepting the ontological assumptions that come with constructivism I am also free to acknowledge my own constructed understandings of both the study and the data that participants presented to me. The "interpretive stance" (Lincoln, 2005, p. 60) of constructivism recognizes that events which take place may well be understood differently by different individuals, an example of this being the interactions that occurred during the interview process. While each event was shared by myself and an individual participant, we each drew our own

meanings and understandings from it. The epistemological assertion that "knowledge is dynamic" (Paul, Graffam & Fowler, 2005, p. 46) and is created socially also serves to recognize the significant link between the researcher and participant (Mertens, 2010) that occurred within this study.

In addition, the tenets of constructivism permitted the use of emergent design which was vital in the completion of the work. The flexibility that emergent research design purports allowed for changes to be made as my own knowledge of the study, the participants, and the process was further enhanced and constructed. This was significant at every stage of the research, but most importantly while out in the field when alterations needed to be made in regards to data collection procedures.

Qualitative Research

The individual perspectives that are understood through constructivism can be uncovered through qualitative research. Such research allows investigators to better understand a central phenomenon of interest by gathering the perspectives of those who are involved in or impacted by it (Merriam, 1998, 2002; Creswell, 2005; Sarantakos, 2005). Patton (as cited in Merriam, 1998) explains that qualitative research

> is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there … it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting – what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what's going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting (Merriam, 1998, p. 5).

The desire to see the world through the eyes of Low German Mennonite youth in this way required a qualitative approach to this research. With decisions being made at various levels (ie. school board, municipal government, provincial government) that greatly impacted the lives of these youth, I noted that not only were the opinions of the youth themselves not being taken into account in the decision-making process, their voices were usually not even heard or asked for.

Due to the belief that their perspectives were essential to the success of any programs designed to help them, I felt that this study could open up a space for such youth to make their ideas and thoughts heard.

As the youth being researched are themselves deeply rooted in their own contexts, environments, and histories, qualitative research "can reveal how all of the parts work together to form a whole" (Merriam, 1998, p. 5), thus exposing the complexities that impact their experiences. Qualitative methods would give me a way of capturing the youths' "reality in action" (Sarantakos, 2005, p. 50) through the collection of thick descriptions which would "open up a world to the reader through rich, detailed, and concrete descriptions of people and places in such a way that we can understand the phenomenon studied" (Patton, 2002, p. 438). Words and text, rather than numbers, are vital to such descriptions and provide the foundation for revealing what the qualitative research has unfolded (Merriam, 1998).

Study location and participants. This study is located in a rural, southern Alberta school division with a history of working with Low German Mennonite parents in an attempt to offer culturally-sensitive, applicable programming for the youth of this population. This particular division has varied programs on offer for these students and I believed that interviewing students within this district would enable me to gain a greater understanding of their individual histories and how their experiences have been impacted by their participation in such programs. The school division being accessed is similar to several in the province that have significant populations of Mennonite children who are in public, church-run, or home education systems, as well as children and youth who are not accessing any form of education at all. It is unique, however, in that it is a division that laboured early on to provide alternative programming to Low German Mennonite children and youth. As such, it was a preferable site for the study.

Its status as a desirable location was further enhanced due to my own background working within this division, which meant that I already had connections that I could call upon in order to work with this relatively closed population. These connections would be necessary in order to obtain parental

consent to speak with youth of this distinct group. Having historically been extremely private people who have been leery of public education systems as a whole, conducting research with Low German Mennonites requires a great deal of time and effort in order to be trusted by group members (Hall & Kulig, 2004). Prior ties are thus vital for locating participants within this population. My ongoing relationship with the Superintendent of this division was necessary for obtaining the trust of the parents and school staff and, perhaps more importantly, for gaining access to students within this region. Furthermore, in order to locate consenting non-school attending participants, I was also able to utilize my connection with a school division employee who worked as a liaison with the Mennonite population. These ties provided reasonable assurance of success in locating participants for the study.

Individual participants to be interviewed were thus obtained through this purposeful, snowball sampling. The flexible nature of qualitative research allowed for me to identify specific individuals to interview while I was in the midst of my data collection efforts rather than picking them prior to embarking on fieldwork. I planned to interview students currently attending school as well as youth who had not been in school for at least one year in order to better understand the varied perspectives of their schooling experiences. Youth between the ages of 14 and 18 were sought out, due to the belief that with a greater number of years in the education system or out in the workforce, these individuals would have more experiences to draw from in relaying their ideas. Their enhanced maturity level would also enable them to better articulate factors that they believed had an impact on their educational experiences. This is especially significant for this population in regards to the student subgroup as many Low German Mennonite youth their age do not attain their level of education. In addition, youth in this age range have generally spent time contemplating their futures – or actually living their futures in the case of working youth – and would likely be able to express their goals more easily than children of a younger age. Finally, my intention was to obtain an equal number of male and female participants from each population group, students and non-school attenders, for comparison.

Plans and Pitfalls: De/limitations of the Study

With the notion of researcher transparency in mind, it is important to reveal why some decisions that were made prior to venturing out into the field, were decided upon as they were. These delimitations to the study are taken up here, followed by the issues that were faced once immersed in fieldwork. Those study limitations must also be addressed as the obstacles impacted the overall findings of the study.

Delimitations

The location for this study was delimited to this rural, southern Alberta school division due to the ties that had been maintained with the Superintendent and the broader Low German Mennonite population there. Recognizing the necessity for trust in working with this population, I believed it was necessary to conduct this research where bonds already existed as opposed to working to create new relationships in other regions where this cultural group commonly settle. Adding in the experiences of other youth from various regions of Alberta, and even further afield, could serve to enhance the richness of the data collected. It may have also led to a greater number of willing participants, positively impacting the comparative aspect of the study. However, in an effort to obtain "boundedness" (Stake, 2008, p. 121) for the study, while also seeking to maintain rich, informative descriptions of lived experiences, one school division was chosen.

Limitations

The findings of this study are not meant to be generalizable to other populations or groups. Instead, this research is intended to highlight the experiences and perspectives of the individuals within the particular group that is described and interviewed (Patton as cited in Merriam, 1998). Therefore, it must be understood that the findings of this research are limited to the specific context, location, and time in which the study took place.

Believing that experience and knowledge is socially constructed requires me, as the researcher, to acknowledge that the responses given by participants were subject to my own understandings and interpretations of them, thus

impacting the analysis process. My position as a semi-/outsider also played a limiting role in the study. Although some participants knew of or recognized me from my previous ties to the cultural and educational community, those former connections were perhaps no longer strong enough to get me 'in' for data collection. This could be representative of the closed, somewhat mistrustful, nature of the population. It certainly impeded the comparative nature of the study as it resulted in a lack of male and non-school attending participants, to be discussed in more detail in the following section. While youth who were not attending school were essentially invisible in that I was unable to locate individuals to interview, the male students chose not to participate in the study. This voluntary invisibility on their part restricted my ability to understand the male perspective of the issue being researched. The other missing piece, the non-school attenders, further limited the study and compelled me to utilize media pieces in an attempt to answer the question 'where are these youth if not in school?' Certainly, these did not provide direct data in regards to what youth themselves were thinking, however, it helped to expose the experiences of Low German Mennonite youth who were not in school.

Issues in obtaining participants could have been exacerbated by the transitory nature of the population. Frequently, Mennonite youth will be absent from school due to work or home commitments, or even because they are travelling south to visit relatives or return to Latin America for the winter season. It is entirely possible that I missed speaking with potential participants because they were not present for any of these reasons. In addition, while virtually all members of this group utilize Alberta's health sector, FOIPP restrictions remove the ability of researchers to access information about the population or individuals who may have been interested in participating in the research, further limiting the study.

Methods of Obtaining Data

Interviews

Data collection for this study occurred between the months of November 2012 and January 2013 and included gathering 19 media pieces that were featured

in newspapers as well as five semi-structured interviews. I deemed interviews as the preferred method of data collection due to the wish to hear the perspectives of the youth through their own words. This desire was supported by the constructivist belief that realities are multiple and socially constructed and, as Fontana and Frey observe, "interviewing is one of the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings" (Fontana and Frey, 2000, p. 645). The semi-structured interviews that were utilized gave me access to the participants' thoughts, ideas and hopes for the future and allowed them to explain the larger context of their experiences, including their own historical and familial backgrounds (Creswell, 2009). Barring that, the accumulation of the media pieces served to compensate, perhaps inadequately, for the absence of individual youths' voices.

In early November and with the superintendent's permission, I contacted two principals who were responsible for three schools within the district that were designed explicitly for this cultural group. In the span of a few days, I made trips to each of the schools to speak with students as potential participants for the study. At each location, I spoke with all of the students from Grades 9 through 12 who were in attendance on those days, explaining in detail the goals of the study and my desire to speak to Low German Mennonite youth in the hopes of gaining knowledge about their schooling experiences and aspirations.

Owing to those visits, I obtained consent from five female participants and their parents to conduct interviews about those experiences. These participants were all either 15 or 16 years of age and attended two of the outreach schools within the division. The semi-structured interviews that resulted from these conversations ranged from 26 to 41 minutes in length. Interviews occurred at the participants' respective schools, in a private room during classtime. The sessions were guided by a set of interview questions which stemmed from the main research questions of the study, a copy of which can be found in Appendix E. The list of interview questions created for the non-school attenders, although unused, is listed under Appendix F. The questions served to gently guide the interview and gave the participants a greater understanding of the research itself. Allowing for

flexibility within the interviews was important as it permitted myself and/or the participants to probe more deeply into certain areas or expand on ideas of particular interest that were either not considered or known when the questions were drafted. The semi-structured format also enabled me to make changes to the interview guide after the first two interviews were conducted as I had a better grasp of how the interviews progressed.

Even though many males were present in the initial meetings when I described the study, none were willing to participate in these interviews. A few weeks into my data collection efforts, I attempted to alter my methods slightly by suggesting that I could meet with some male students in a focus group interview rather than in one-on-one interviews. I had hoped that this modification would help to put male students at ease with the interviewing process, however, this did not entice any members of this distinct subgroup to participate. The lack of male participants drastically limited the hoped-for male perspective within the study.

The desire to fully understand the varying perspectives of Mennonite youth was further hindered by my inability to reach any youth who were not being served by the public schools within this region. The school division informant who worked extensively with the population was unable to locate any potential subjects for me to interview while my own attempts at snowball sampling for out-of-school youth with my personal contacts within the cultural group also fell flat.

Newspaper Sources

Without having the point of view of the non-school participants in the form of interviews, I strove to find another way of gaining information about these youth who were invisible to me during fieldwork. Rather than depending on interviews as a means of collecting data about this group, I obtained newspaper pieces that I believed might address the experiences of the non-school attenders. Documents such as these are seen as a non-intrusive form of data collection, as those whose words and ideas being studied are not required to be available for an interview (Bowen, 2009). While this can have disadvantages in that a researcher may not be able to ask participants for further clarification, thus leaving potential gaps in the data, documents enhanced this particular study in several ways.

The primary function of the acquired documents for this study was to provide another source of data in an attempt to more fully understand the experiences of Low German Mennonite youth. In addition to this central purpose, these documents served to deepen the historical, political, and economic contexts in which these youth functioned on a daily basis. Regional concerns about these youth were chronicled through these sources and enabled me to provide a richer description of the issues impacting the study. Finally, combining methods of data collection can be a means of triangulation in order to increase the credibility of the study (Sarantakos, 2005). Utilizing documents in this way can verify research findings and corroborate the evidence that was discovered through the interviews, thus strengthening the credibility of the results.

Data that addressed the non-school attenders took the form of editorials, letters to the editor and news items that were procured from a total of four newspapers, two of which were relatively small local weekly papers serving the particular rural areas that were chosen as the site for the study and two of which were daily newspapers that represented the larger southern Alberta region. The intent was to collect items that appeared within the four newspapers throughout the months of data collection, which ranged from November 2012 to January 2013. Pieces that made mention of the Low German Mennonite population or addressed issues that directly impact this cultural group were gathered as potential document data sources. Through this process, items that discussed farm safety regulations, child labour issues, and home education debates were acquired. These were unusually hot topics in the local papers throughout these months due to the ongoing labour issues being discussed in the region and at the provincial level. In reading these items, I realized that some pieces were written in response to previous news articles that had been featured. Because of this, I chose to include three prior pieces, resulting in the accumulation of 19 pieces for content analysis: 4 editorials, 6 letters to the editor and 9 news articles.

Methods of Analyzing Data

The data for this study consists of five transcripts from interviews with five different female student participants, in addition to the 19 items gleaned from

the newspapers. Rather than follow a strict procedure for analysis, the fluid nature of qualitative analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was embraced in this stage of the research. Continually interacting with both the data and the literature throughout the analysis process resulted in a consistent cycling between the two. In this way, analysis was conducted both inductively (Berg, 1998) as themes were extracted from the data during open and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and deductively through the consideration of potential themes prior to fieldwork (Berg, 1998).

Data was extracted from the media pieces by simply focusing on the question: where are Low German Mennonite youth if not in school? Since "texts are written to do something" (Hodden, 2000, p. 705), I had to consider the possible intent on the part of each writer. By looking at document data with a "critical eye" (Bowen, 2009, p. 33), I was able to tease information out of the documents. When dealing with news articles, I attempted to utilize direct quotations as much as possible. Because journalists have the ability to choose interviewees' quotations to serve their own agendas, I surmised that using individuals' exact words would result in an enhanced understanding of what that person thought about the topic at hand. While the editorials and letters to the editor provided direct statements from authors about issues being discussed, those writers were still making decisions about what to include and what to leave out of their piece. Opinions and information that were consciously excluded from those pieces were just as significant as what may have been left out of the news articles. This potential missing information must be acknowledged as a possible disadvantage to the use of these documents in the study.

In spite of these concerns, the media sources provided a vast amount of data with which to work. Once data was compiled, descriptive content analysis (Sarantakos, 2005) occurred with the intention of better understanding what was being said about these youth and the assumptions that those making the comments held about them and their current situations. This data was also coded and added to the interview data, with both sets eventually evolving into themes.

Study Trustworthiness

Rather than the concern for validity, reliability, and objectivity that postpositivism calls for, the interpretive nature of this qualitative research seeks for trustworthiness in a different manner. The "truth value" (Guba, 1981, p. 79), or credibility, of the findings was enhanced primarily through the use of triangulation as two different data collection methods, interviews and the use of newspaper documents, were employed. Credibility was further strengthened through the use of member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interviews were audio-recorded, allowing for thorough transcription to be done. Participants were then presented with a hard copy of their individual transcriptions to read through and were encouraged to make alterations or additions to the documents as they saw fit. One of the five participants chose to make deletions and clarifications to her document through this process of member checking.

Another method of enhancing the credibility of the study was to engage in pretesting of the interview questions prior to fieldwork. I approached two highly trusted former students of Low German Mennonite background to go through the questions, checking for clarity and forthrightness. Their feedback gave me the opportunity to edit the questions to ensure that participants' answers would provide significant responses that would adequately inform the study.

Instead of seeking for generalizability of the findings, I wanted to provide the opportunity for readers of the research to transfer the findings to their own context. As such, I sought for transferability of the results by providing rich descriptions of the study location, in addition to the historical and social contexts that impacted the lives of the study participants (Guba, 1981). Similarly, the collected data was presented in as much detail as possible with extensive use of the participants' own words (Guba, 1981). By giving explicit information about the study and its context, along with detailed descriptions of the data, readers will be better able to make comparisons between this work and their own.

Dependability was approached through the consistent tracking of the study, including results of meetings, interviews, and literature reviews, and throughout the analysis process. To ensure that the data and findings were not

"figments of the researcher's imagination" (Mertens, 2010, p. 260), I worked to be reflexive for the duration of the study. This search for confirmability forced me to consistently question my beliefs and biases throughout the research process and to ask myself whether I was allowing the data to speak for itself.

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the University of Alberta's Research Ethics Board and was in compliance with the outlined regulations for conducting ethical research with human participants. As stated previously, my initial contact with participants came through the Superintendent of the cooperating school division who gave permission to access students through schools within the division's boundaries. I was encouraged to contact the principals of the schools that we believed would have students who would fall into my criteria for participants and who might also be interested in participating. Those principals arranged for me to speak to their students collectively about the research that I was undertaking. Following those presentations, I left Participant Assent Forms [Appendix C] and Parent Consent Forms [Appendix D] with the students so they could discuss the study with their parents prior to getting consent and giving their own assent to participate. With the intention of ensuring participant anonymity, I provided students with my contact information if they wished to contact me directly to discuss their participation in the study. However, I also encouraged them to let their principal know of their interest in participating if they were more comfortable taking that approach.

In regards to potential participants who were not in school, the Superintendent put me in contact with the division's Mennonite Liaison Worker who had ties to the community being researched. He was prepared to work with me to locate potential participants for the project, however, as discussed previously, these individuals were seemingly impossible to find at the time of data collection.

Before each interview, participants were again ensured of their anonymity within the study and were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point prior to data analysis. In addition, they were advised of their freedom to

refrain from answering any questions that they did not feel comfortable with. They were also asked at this time whether they were comfortable with having the interview audio-recorded.

To ensure the confidentiality of those who chose to participate, individuals were encouraged to choose pseudonyms for themselves which would be used in the reporting of the data. Those who didn't provide an alternative name were assigned one by myself during data analysis, resulting in a range of comments from *Judy, Agatha, Isabelle, Savanna,* and *Eva* as reported in the next chapter. Additionally, any identifying information was removed from the media pieces with the sole intention of protecting the identity of the participants. Items such as the titles of the newspapers and the names of towns, regions, organizations, and people who were quoted or discussed were left out of the reporting of the data in order to ensure that information could not be traced back to the participants in any way.

From Methodology to Findings

The detailed outline of this research supplies the reader with a thorough account of the both the initial, planned structure of the study and the flexible implementation of those plans. The explanation of methodology, in which the basic beliefs that create a foundation for the study are described, serves to enhance the understanding of choices made in regards to the tools utilized for both data collection and analysis. Although the study called for a comparative element, the fluidity of qualitative, constructive research permitted this work to stray from that original plan during the data collection phase. Similarly, it allowed for flexibility and a continual return to the literature during analysis. This adaptability resulted in the data as revealed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS – THE PATH TO SUCCESS

In an attempt to organize the collected data, I was struck by the tension that surrounded the experiences of the participants I interviewed and those who were represented by the media pieces. Like other teens, Mennonite youth are negotiating their own identities but they are doing so in a seemingly larger, yet more intricate, context. While striving towards futures of their own choosing, these youth are dealing with exceptional present-day experiences, many of which are heavily influenced by not only their own heritage, but by the histories of their parents, grandparents, and earlier ancestors. In recognition of the tensions evident in their experiences, the study findings have been organized around the chronological themes of future aspirations, present experiences, and past influences, all of which must be navigated by these youth in their current circumstances.

Future Aspirations

Success would be finished school. A good career. Just feeling content and happy with your life. (Isabelle, Interview)

When asked for their definitions of educational success, participants spoke hopefully of futures in which they would be able to work competently in careers that they enjoyed. They acknowledged that they would need to graduate from high school prior to obtaining their employment of choice, with some recognizing the need for further training in a post-secondary program. Other, more intrinsic factors also came into play in participants' understandings of what their future success would look like.

High School Diploma = A Better Future

A high school diploma is my main goal right now so if I got that I would be really proud of myself. (Eva, Interview)

This quotation from Eva reflects the common desire between all five of the participants to graduate from high school. While she was the only one who expressed the sense of personal accomplishment that she might gain from such an event, she and the others all indicated the perceived need for a high school

diploma as preparation for future work. At another point in the interview, she repeated her wish, this time tying it to enhanced opportunities for employment:

> *I really wanna get my diploma. Cause now already a lot of jobs you need your diploma so in the future it'll probably be more places you'll need your diploma. Yeah, something like that. So I think that would help me a lot to get a good job when I'm older. (Eva, Interview)*

This belief was supported in the interviews of other participants and revealed a common notion that completion of high school was seen by youth as the means of escape from undesirable forms of employment with which they were currently familiar. Judy *"can see that without a diploma you don't really get any good jobs and I really don't want to work at those cheap jobs or anything".* When asked for clarification about what she meant by *"cheap jobs"* she came up with grading potatoes, common employment for Mennonite women and youth. Savanna contributed to this by asserting that with more education *"you get more pay and there's just some jobs you can't even get unless you have your high school diploma,"* an idea that was repeated almost verbatim by Isabelle.

Rather than being tied to those 'cheap jobs' for their adult lives, the students interviewed sought greater opportunities. The students' most pressing goal of completing high school appeared to be directly linked in their minds to future success in the world of work. Judy explained that *"first of all, I want to graduate and be a registered nurse which will take me like 4 years."* Her understanding of her chosen profession begins with the need for a diploma as a means to enter a nursing program in a college or university. Other students were much less sure of their intentions for future employment with only Savanna suggesting a possible career, also in nursing. However, all were clear in their need for a diploma as a way to get where they wanted to go, or perhaps, more specifically, to get away from a work life comprised of 'cheap jobs'.

The other three participants had much more vague ambitions for themselves and had obviously not spent as much time considering life beyond high school graduation. Eva's only hint of a possible career came when she stated *"I've had a lot of teachers in my life say that I'd make a really good teacher."*

That encouragement has not appeared to influence any significant decision in regards to her future plans. Fashion designer was the only work of interest that Agatha mentioned throughout the interview but she stipulated that she wanted more than one job: *"I don't want to do the same thing my whole life."* Finally, while Isabelle was very uncertain about potential careers, she had a unique goal with respect to courses she would like to take in her remaining high school years. Her dream was to *"study cultural arts. Cause I like knowing people's viewpoints."*

Helping. Isabelle's assertion that *"I want to do something with my life that helps people and I think that getting an education is a good way to start that"* brings up another common thread. When looking at three out of the five participants' rationales for choosing their prospective careers, this inclination to help is repeated. Judy's dream of becoming a nurse seemed to be heavily influenced by her yearning to help. Once she completes her nursing training she *"might work a little and then I want to get on any kind of program just to be a missionary nurse, like go to mission trips most of my life."* When asked why that was appealing to her, she replied

> *I don't know. It's – in Mexico we see lots of people who were homeless, not so much here. But it's kind of always been my goal to help people and now when I watch videos, like, from Uganda people and Africa and floods and, oh, and definitely Haiti when the earthquake was there. There was people who came there and showed pretty disgusting pictures of what happened there. I guess it became my dream to help people that way. (Judy, Interview)*

The other potential nurse, Savanna, also believed that nursing would be a good career because she enjoyed *"being around people, helping people*."

Dreams of College

> *I would really like to [go to college. I haven't decided what to take] but the idea of going to college. I'd really like to do that. (Eva, Interview)*

Three of the students acknowledged that college was a possibility in their futures. Certainly, Judy was quite clear in her need to go to college in order to

become a nurse. When asked whether her parents would support her in that, she replied *"they're letting me go to nursing school as long as I come up with the money myself. Cause they don't have money saved or anything for me to go to school like that."* To achieve her goal she determined that she's *"gonna do jobs and try to apply to lots of scholarships and that's all the ideas I have."* Eva also spoke of both the inclination to go to college and the uncertainty of how to pay for post-secondary education. While she was unsure of her specific career aspirations, she did comment that she

> *would really like to go to college but with, like, money and all, I don't know how that would exactly work out. I mean, that's definitely something I'd like to work towards… Like get a job to maybe save up to go to college one day. Yeah, I would really like to do that. (Eva, Interview)*

Only Agatha had any commitment of parental financial support in attending college in the future. Ironically, it was not an idea she was particularly interested in at that point in her life. She explained that she had the *"choice"* to go to college and that her mom *"has accounts for us [she and her siblings], like, she's put money in since we were kids, little kids." (Agatha, Interview)*

Intrinsic Markers of Success

In addition to more mainstream, evident markers of success such as a high school diploma and a specific career, two participants also spoke of the happiness they hoped such achievements would bring. Isabelle, whose quotation opened this theme, added to her ideas about success meaning being happy and content with life by elaborating further. When asked if she felt she would need a diploma to feel successful she replied, *"yeah, and maybe going to college, have a really good career that you're happy with. And maybe living on your own with good living conditions. And volunteer work maybe. And success is being with other people too."* Eva also spoke of educational success as being *"a really good feeling. Knowing that you've achieved something more and that you were able to go further in life, further than you thought you might be able to."*

Future Opportunities and Children's Rights

Some individuals within the media pieces spoke of the need to protect Eva's and other children's desires to 'go further in life' and to ensure that choices are left open to them. In a letter to the editor, a citizen stated that many Mennonite young adults are *"completing their GED after being forced to quit school by their parents in order for them to contribute to the family income"* implying that it is the completion of some formal education that enables youth to have greater opportunities. She went on to declare that *"children have a right to be educated in order for them to be able to make choices regarding their adult future."* Her concern that *"these children have no voice, and their rights must be protected"* caused her to write not one, but two letters to the editor to clarify her position when another writer voiced some opposition to and/or misunderstanding of her first letter *(Citizen, Letter to the editor, Local weekly newspaper)*.

The notion of the rights of children was reiterated by a locally-elected politician in a news article about a meeting concerning the education of Low German Mennonite children. The reporter explained that much discussion in the meeting referred to parents' rights in deciding upon their children's educational options. The Reeve's ponderings were then quoted:

> *I guess at the end of the day, what are the children's rights? Does a child in Alberta have a right to an education? To me that is the bigger question. Where is that tradeoff between a parent's right and a child's right to an education?" (Reeve, Article, Local weekly newspaper)*

Present Experiences

The concern shown for the protection of children's rights today in order to keep doors open for them in the future, as discussed by both the letter-writing citizen and the reeve, hints at the impact of the current experiences of these children and youth on those future options. Questions surrounding the daily activities of Low German Mennonites who do not access public education in Alberta were present throughout many of the media pieces and were given weight by the participants' own experiences, particularly those of schooling and work. Those interviewed were able to articulate their perceptions of what school offered

to them and how family ties impacted their ability to access education in their present contexts.

What School Offers

I love learning, yes. I love school! People find me really weird with that. (Eva, Interview)

Both Eva and Judy commented that they loved school and learning. While others didn't phrase their feelings in this way, Isabelle and Savanna also appeared to value their school for various reasons. Agatha, on the other hand, was more resigned to the fact that she would continue her education due to parental pressure. All participants, however, spoke of how their present schools offered up specific, positive features for their learning which included strengthening skills, individualized and flexible programming, and affirming and encouraging relationships with others.

Useful skills/transferable learning. When asked about what things they felt were important to learn, participants generally commented on specific courses and skills that they could extrapolate into other areas of life. For instance, Isabelle noted that *"everybody needs to know a little bit about shop and cooking too. It's just part of life."* Eva agreed with this assessment, giving greater detail in how these courses could be helpful to one in the future:

> *Taking cooking can give you good skills for when you become older if you move out or if you get married. Learning to make meals and stuff. And shop class we do mechanics, fabrication and construction so if we ever – cause there's girls that enter into the trade too and if you ever decide to go into the trade that would be really helpful. (Eva, Interview)*

Savanna also realized that the skills she was gaining in school were applicable in her daily life when she talked about how even her typing had improved as a result of her schoolwork.

Learning that resulted from work in core courses was noteworthy as well. Isabelle stated that Social *"helps me see things from other people's point of view better. And Math, I don't know. It helps you with a recipe if you need to double them or something. Or write down your hours after work."* Eva also felt that

"Math you use, like, pretty much everywhere. Without even realizing it." Agatha's experience with Language Arts was relevant to her because *"when you live on your own you have paperwork to do so you need to know how to write stuff and read."*

She was not as quick to support some other learning that occurred in her schooling career, however. She noted *"I love Social but I don't know what the point of it is." (Agatha, Interview)* The same was true of her experiences in both Math and Science: *"Yeah, I think [Math] is important but the algebra and stuff, it's like, why do we learn it? … some parts of [Science] are important but some parts are like, why am I learning this?"* Certainly, while some aspects of the core subjects have obvious significance for these students, others may leave them wondering how they are applicable to their current and future lives. This could lead to possible frustration for a population that is given the freedom to completely check out of school when what is valued in it is outweighed by negative experiences associated with it. It is also worth noting that Eva wasn't able to fully articulate why she thought what she learned in school was important, simply that *"if we learn it in school it must be important for something."* Her unquestioning acceptance of the significance of what she was learning could be problematic as it could permit schools to maintain the status quo rather than adapt educational practices to provide more relevant programming to students.

Individualized, flexible programming and enhanced opportunities.

I think it's pretty cool how we do it like this, kind of on our own because when we go into the real world we won't always have someone there to help us. (Eva, Interview)

The flexibility found in one of the programs in particular was highly valued by those students who attended the school. As an outreach school, it had a greater focus on individualized programming for each student. This approach was obviously appreciated by the students, as evidenced by their comments regarding the independent learning in their high school courses:

> *I like it. I can pace myself more. Like, I can get ahead or if I miss a day I'm not way behind. (Savanna, Interview)*

Well, I kinda like just doing it on your own…If you miss a day or two then you're not behind and you can just kind of work on it again. And sometimes I feel that you can work, I can just work better like that. Cause some things I'm like faster at it than other people but most things I'm slower so I need to take my time on most everything. (Isabelle, Interview)

This ability to work independently and at one's own pace was valued by one student at the other program who explained that when you're educated *"you don't always have to go ask other people, what am I supposed to do? What am I supposed to do? Like you can do it for yourself" (Agatha, Interview)*. However, Eva did acknowledge that *"not being direct taught, it's hard to get used to."* Even though she recognized the importance of the individualized programming she was receiving, she was grateful that there were still teachers around that could help her when necessary. At the same time, Judy felt that she learned *"best when teachers are there. I don't like to work by myself. Like, things that I don't get, the teachers can help me with that and that's about the best way to learn for me."*
Interestingly, Savanna had varying learning preferences. She noted that her learning style depended on the subject: *"Like in Social and Language, like the writing courses, I have to be totally alone. I can't write around other people. But like, Science and Math, I don't know, I can work with anyone pretty much." (Savanna, Interview)*

Students were not completely thrust into this independent learning situation upon arrival at the school though. Isabelle explained that it is the high school students who are given the opportunity for this self-paced learning and that those in junior high encounter greater structure to their learning.

When we're in Grade 7 to 9 we do Science experiments sometimes and we're direct taught. Teacher makes sure we understand everything we need to know. Then in high school we kind of go our separate ways and we can just go to the teacher if we need help. (Isabelle, Interview)

The flexible nature of the program seems to present the students with some unique opportunities as well. Savanna revealed that

another thing about this school is that we have a lot of opportunities to do stuff. Like, I'm going to Speak Out! in April … And there's so much things that we can take, different courses, like the German courses, there's Bible courses. (Savanna, Interview)

She also really likes the field trips that the students frequently go on.

We went to Frank Slide, yeah. And we have also gone to Writing-on-Stone and it's just, like, they take us on tours and actually being there then history's interesting. Cause then you can actually see everything. Yeah, I think field trips are very important. (Savanna, Interview)

Savanna's descriptions of the opportunities that she has been presented with do not stop there. Apparently, the previous year she mentioned to her teachers that she was interested in participating in a Work Experience project in which she would assist a teacher at the nearby elementary school. As she explains

first I was saying I wanted to be in the German classes, right? But then they were saying that I was supposed to have something different. Like, um, I was in the German classes [as an elementary student], right? And it was supposed to be like I was actually in a job. So, yeah, I go there and it's always their Language class so I just kind of help them read sentences and then on Thursdays they have library so I'll help them pick out books. Just little jobs. (Savanna, Interview)

When asked how this was beneficial for her she responded that she needed the credits that she earned from her Work Experience in order to graduate from high school.

School Relationships.

It just seems like you can actually talk to [the teachers], not only school but other things too. I don't know how to explain it but [my teacher] is almost like a friend to talk to… It's just easier to talk to a teacher when you kind of know each other better. Like personally. And it's just easier to ask them for help then, for me anyway. (Savanna, Interview)

Supportive school staff and friends played significant roles in the lives of these participants. While Savanna was the most emphatic in her description of the

positive student-teacher relationships at her school, other students echoed her assertion of the importance of good, helpful teachers to their educational success. Eva explained that teachers were *"always encouraging us. 'Take it home for homework. Do a little bit every night and try to get as far as you can.'"* She revealed that she'd *"fallen a little bit behind but we still get a lot of teacher help so if we need, like, we can sit with them at their desks and they can help us through everything." (Eva, Interview)*

Teachers appeared to do more than just assist students in their comprehension of subject matter. Judy's teacher was also her career-planning counselor and worked with students to plan for life beyond high school. It had been observed by another participant, though, that some teachers had possibly been stretched a little too thin. Savanna divulged that some of her teachers worked between two schools and that

> *some days they're here and some days they're there. And it's, I can tell that it stresses them and sometimes we need their help but they're not there. And in my opinion texting isn't the best way to communicate with a teacher. (Savanna, Interview)*

Such frustrations did not appear to negatively impact students' views of their teachers, though. Overall, teachers were still perceived to be quite understanding and responsive to the needs of their students.

It was not solely school staff who were influential in the success of the school lives of these students, however. Friends served as both encouragers and role models. Isabelle recognized that *"if I see other people graduating and that encourages me to also do that. And there's Savanna. She always works really hard so that encourages me."* Savanna herself explained that she felt no pressure from any friends to leave school since most of her friends attended school as well. Believing that had in fact changed from previous years, she noted that *"with my brother, he always said that he had pressure like 'why don't you just quit school?' And he says now he will never regret that he graduated."*

Invisible Youth

While Savanna was hopeful that things had improved for all Low German Mennonite students, the question that was posed to her brother during his school days has likely not gone away completely. My fruitless search for non-school attending youth implied that such individuals held an invisible status in society. Unable to be contacted for potential interviews, they appeared to fly under the radar of public school systems. These individuals were obviously known to the general public in a collective way, though. Individuals in the newspaper sources spoke quite emphatically about the absence of these youth from accredited schools in lieu of employment. One news article talked about

> *the staggering high number of Low German Mennonite youth dropping out of school…those teens end up years behind their peers in reading and writing. Instead of school, they work on farms and in fast-food joints, according to agencies and school officials. (Reporter, Article, Regional daily newspaper)*

This was corroborated by an editorial which declared that *"youngsters are working on local farms, youngsters who would otherwise be in the classroom. It is impossible to pinpoint those numbers." (Editorial, local weekly newspaper)*

The vast numbers of youth being described likely assists in cloaking these individuals from the public's view. While they are present and people are aware of what is going on, in many ways they go unnoticed. This may not be an unwelcome reality for some youth. A school division Mennonite liaison worker expressed frustration by stating *"to be honest, that is perhaps one of the harder parts of my job, is working with young teens, even preteens in some cases, who don't want to go back to school." (School division Mennonite liaison worker, Regional daily newspaper)* In such instances, invisibility may be desirable for youth and may in fact be a comfortable existence for them. Having been raised in a communal culture where no one is to stand out from the pack, youth may be accustomed to being unseen. In fact, they may prefer to remain part of a faceless crowd of working Mennonite youth who are known about, but never actually known.

While some individuals may voluntarily take on a cloak of invisibility in this way, those who remain in school, like Savanna's brother, can experience friction when features of present school systems rub up against certain aspects of their daily lives. This tension occurs most notably when students have other responsibilities, particularly to their families, that they must see to.

Family Support/Supporting Family

Dad, he told us if we wanted to go to school we had to work so that's the deal. So he lets us go to school but we have to work and so there's not much encouragement from my parents but still we get to go to school. (Judy, Interview)

Throughout the interviews, participants' comments revealed how their family ties both encouraged and hindered their ability to access education in their daily lives. As Judy's quote attests, attending school oftentimes required some negotiation with parents in order to remain in the education system. In fact, Agatha was the only participant who did not have to miss any school in order to help support the family financially. As the participant whose mother had been saving for her college education since she was young, she seemed to be the one with the greatest support from her parents in regards to completing high school, to the point that she felt that she was being *"forced" (Agatha, Interview)* to graduate with a high school diploma. In addition to the promise of financial assistance for further education, both of her parents had been encouraging her to decide upon a future career, with her mother hoping that she would go into nursing and her dad wishing for his daughter to become a journeyman mechanic, something he had been unable to accomplish due to his inability to read.

Only one other participant discussed her parents' expectations that she complete high school. While Savanna's parents have not planned financially for any post-secondary life for their daughter, their wishes for her have factored into her commitment to remain in school. When asked about why she had stayed in school she responded, *"well, my brother graduated and my sister did. My parents expect me to."* The model of her older siblings obtaining high school diplomas seemed to play an encouraging role in her continued attendance at school.

Comments from the other participants revealed that parents essentially tolerated their desires to attend school, however, there was a greater chance that the girls' mothers were the ones that were more supportive of their daughters' educational pursuits. Eva indicated that while her dad wanted her to get a job, her mom *"doesn't really say. She wants us to do whatever we really want to do. So she's not, like, really strict and she doesn't say 'no, you can't do that. I'd rather have you do this.' She's more flexible."* Even Judy's mother appeared to value education to a higher degree than her father whose 'deal' with his children was outlined in this section's opening quotation. Judy said that her mom

> *goes to school sometimes. Like last year she did, like 3 days a week she goes to school. And this year not so much but she really wants to get her ... what's that called? Instead of a diploma? [GED]. Yes, she wants to get that. (Judy, Interview)*

In spite of her mother's dream of obtaining more education, Judy herself was still required to miss several weeks of school in order to work and earn money for the subsistence of the family. Like her, Isabelle, Savanna, and Eva all worked in the summer and/or fall in exchange for attending school for the remainder of the year.

While she was grateful that she never had to work in the agricultural industry, Agatha was not immune from the obligation to support her family by working outside of the home. She spent her Saturdays assisting her mother with cleaning others' homes and their own church for additional income and was required to help her father with his mechanic jobs when needed. There were other ways in which she supported her family as well. Like those of the other participants, her parents relied on her for assistance in dealing with paperwork demanded by the government. All participants but one explained the need to provide support to their parents in this manner:

> *Since I started going to school my English got way better so I can help my parents with paperwork that we still had to do. So that was pretty cool. (Judy, Interview)*

And my dad doesn't really know how to do [the paperwork] so I have to do it for him… I just always have to help my dad with everything because he can't read or write. (Agatha, Interview)

Doing paperwork at home for my dad. Yeah, all the GST at the end of every 3 months. (Savanna, Interview)

[My parents] like it that we're getting better educated because they can barely read English and stuff. So having us there to help them, like with paperwork or anything that they need help with, it helps them out a lot. (Eva, Interview)

Participants appeared to be willing assistants to their parents in this way, with some speaking of their role with a degree of pride that they could provide this service for their families. However, none spoke of the irony of a situation in which parents relied on children for literacy support while at the same time encouraging them to abandon their educations.

Helping at home wasn't restricted to simply completing paperwork required by government authorities. Routine chores included making dinner and performing weekly cleaning. As Agatha explained, *"anything [mom] needs help with I do,"* a sentiment not limited to her own personal experiences. She relayed that *"I was at my cousins' house yesterday and they have to quit school so they can help at home 24/7 I guess. They work at home and they grade potatoes and that money all goes to their parents."* While helping at home is seen as imperative for young female Mennonites, bringing a paycheque home is equally vital to the livelihood of their families.

Life at work.

And another thing that encourages me to stay in school is sometimes in harvest I have to grade potatoes and it's really, really miserable. I don't want a job like that when I'm older so that motivates me to do my schoolwork. (Isabelle, Interview)

In many cases, supporting family takes the form of Mennonite children and youth engaging in low- or un-skilled labour, generally of an agricultural nature, which can pull them out of school for weeks at a time. As mentioned

previously, it is partly due to these experiences that the participants interviewed are seeking a high school diploma as a means of escape from such employment. Isabelle makes this clear through the previous quotation which was in response to the query of who or what encourages her to remain in school. Descriptions of the work conditions and experiences that these youth encounter in the agricultural industry reveal how not all youth may feel as encouraged as Isabelle was but may, in fact, find their educational attainment hindered by their working life. Isabelle's own account of her work experiences over the past 2 harvest seasons are eye-opening in regards to the work conditions that these youth face.

> *Yeah, [it lasts] about 4 or 5 weeks…the year before we always worked from 7 til 10 and this year we only worked 12 hours. Yeah. We had a half hour lunch break then though…yep 1 [coffee break] in the aft – no, we had 2 in the afternoon and 1 in the morning. [Supper] was like a break, 15 minute break and if you wanted to bring something you could just, eat it then. [This year] it was only 7 til 7. But the thing is you only got a 15 minute lunch break. (Isabelle, Interview)*

Grading potatoes, which every student mentioned as an undesirable form of employment that all but one had participated in, involves workers standing at a conveyor belt upon which harvested potatoes are unloaded from the trucks. These employees are expected to sort out the bad potatoes, rocks, dirt clumps and other unwanted material from the load, leaving only the potatoes that are market-worthy.[5] Eva explained that *"it's hard cause you're standing there and then when it's break time then it's like, hard to walk because you're standing there for the longest time and then you're trying to walk."* The olfactory unpleasantness was also noted: *"the smell is really bad! It's a really bad smell" (Eva, Interview).* Judy augments Eva's experience by adding that *"it's very hard and you only get paid like $10/hour."* She contributes further to the understanding of the harvest work experience by explaining that she works *"just for the harvest. It's like all September pretty much and then in October it's not that bad." (Judy, Interview)*

[5] Description of potato grading based on author's prior knowledge from discussions with former students and visiting a potato factory during harvest.

However, in Savanna's experience, grading potatoes was not limited to the weeks of harvest. When I spoke to her in January she told me that she *"worked [last] Friday and then they just ship. I was just working for someone else cause they couldn't make it in."* She appeared to have a more flexible employer than other youth, though, as she explained that during the last harvest she *"went to school in the morning and then went to work after lunch until like 7ish." (Savanna, Interview)*

A more somber account of child work conditions in the region was revealed in a Letter to the Editor of a local weekly newspaper. A community member voiced concern over the work that young Mennonites were being asked to do and stated *"unfortunately, I have firsthand knowledge of children as young as eight grading potatoes and cleaning out cattle liners on farms. I have seen the crippled hand of a 13-year-old from a potato grading accident." (Citizen, Letter to the editor, Local weekly newspaper)* While other media pieces did not point to specifics in regard to agricultural work practices or child worker injuries as in the previous letter, several did speak of the debate regarding child labour legislations within the province, outlining the need for further discussions to occur.

Although the study participants have been spared from serious incidents to date, they may not have been left entirely unscathed by their agricultural work lives. The school issues that arise when students are forced out of school for the purposes of work could certainly impede the education of those who are either less supported or less motivated. Judy's explanation of how work impacts her education sheds light on the tensions that these youth must manage:

> *I don't have to work every day cause my sister she's like, she's in Grade 9, she helps too. So we do it every other day. So we wouldn't have that much homework piled on us… It's very hard but if I really want to go to school I do work just as, well, since I have to. Just willing to do it. It's very hard. Sometimes I do feel that. Um, the work is not that much but it gives me very little time to do my homework and everything. During the time that I work my grade levels drop quite a bit so it's pretty hard. I do miss class time but my teachers are very understanding so they just give me*

homework. Like stuff that I can work on. Well, they give me what they did on that day. They give that to me for homework. I work on that in, like, after school and then catch up on the rest of, on the rest of the stuff, like, the next day when I come to school. (Judy, Interview)

It was because of this lack of time to complete schoolwork during the busy harvest work schedule that Isabelle and Savanna were so grateful to have their individualized school program that they could slip in and out of throughout those hectic autumn weeks.

Obviously, life at work for Mennonite youth has significant bearing on their educational experiences and attainment. Juggling homework with heavy work schedules could be draining for any young person. Favourable schooling experiences, including practical skill acquisition, flexible programs and supportive school relationships, can work to counter Mennonite youth dropping out completely in order to support their families, something these individuals seem compelled to continue doing. As Isabelle says, even though she dislikes grading potatoes *"if my family needs help then I'll do it again."*

Past Influences

Public school practices that are often hampered by this harvest work can in turn conflict with the desire of Low German Mennonite parents to maintain their culture, language and traditional customs. Such discrepancies can affect whether children and youth remain in or even enter into the public education system in Alberta. The previous schooling experiences of both the participants and their parents, including home-schooling, church-run schools, and the traditional Mennonite education system in Mexico, factor into parents' decisions about their children's education. Their perceived ability to maintain the aspects of the culture that they deem most valuable within any given system appear to play a significant role in how they choose to educate their offspring.

Prior Experiences of Schooling

I love it here, it's one of the best schools – well, I could say the best school I've ever gone to. (Judy, Interview)

There were moments within individual interviews when certain participants seemed to juxtapose their current schooling experiences with those they had previously encountered. That was clearly evident in Judy's statement above, which she directly contrasted with her education in a Mexican colony school. The same was true for participants in regards to both the home-schooling experience and the church-run schools within Alberta. Their statements denouncing these forms of schooling were augmented by the opinions of those revealed through the media pieces.

Homeschooling.

Farm labour is not regulated, therefore, these children simply drop out (usually after grades 6-8), and are "home-schooled", by their parents who rarely can read or write in English. (Citizen, Letter to the editor, Local weekly newspaper)

One educational system that was used by two participants as a foil to the public schools of which they were presently a part, was that of homeschooling. While neither had personally participated in home education as it is generally understood in Alberta, they both spoke of the seemingly undesirable nature of that type of learning. Agatha spoke of the ability to learn

> *at home if you do homeschool but who wants to do that? You can't communicate with your friends or anyone and if there's, like, there's no teacher there all the time. No help. Well, there's help sometimes but not always. (Agatha, Interview)*

This form of education was also unappealing to Isabelle and factored into her decision to return to the public system as she did not want to have to do high school through the homeschooling system, her only option had she stayed at the church-run school she had been attending.

The notion of home education as an influence on the lives of Mennonite youth was displayed in the media pieces as well. The first piece was an editorial that linked the homeschool phenomenon with the prevalence of child labour issues in Alberta.

> *But perhaps it is the elephant in the room that no one seems to want to talk about is the pre-dominant underage farm labour found here in southern*

> *Alberta with Low German Mennonites. As mentioned in this week's [newspaper] as well, is the discussion on home schooling which is common among Mennonite households where often Mennonite children, some not yet in their teens, are taken out of the education system to help out with farming … Exactly how effective the home schooling system is in the Mennonite culture is up for debate, but it can lead to abuses if not done properly. (Editorial, Local weekly newspaper)*

That concern regarding possible exploitation of the home education regulations was brought up by five other individuals in the media pieces. Ranging from Alberta's Deputy Premier to a worried local citizen, these individuals all highlighted the ongoing discussions about home education and their effects on Low German Mennonite youth. The Deputy Premier, himself the former Minister of Education, was quoted as saying *"unfortunately there is a bit of a perceived loophole in that [home education] regulation that allows certain groups … that will use the home schooling regulation almost to exempt their children out of education." (Article, Local weekly newspaper)* This 'loophole' was further articulated through a letter sent to the government by a local politician that was described by a news article as filing a complaint that

> *hundreds of Mennonite youth were essentially working for their parents under the auspices of being home schooled. He argued the Home Education Regulations were being abused, and the students 'study under the direction of functionally illiterate parents and teachers in church-based schools.' (Locally-elected politician, Article, Regional daily newspaper)*

This idea was bolstered by the comment that opened this section which came from a community member's letter to the editor, as well as an article that quoted the president of a regional agricultural producers group who gave a remarkably similar statement (Article, Local weekly newspaper). The reeve of the region worked to clarify the municipal government's stance on home education. In an article addressing the growing debate around child labour in the region, the journalist communicated his views as follows:

The home school issue is getting distorted. 'It's no education we are getting worried about, not home education.' Home education is getting a 'black eye' and in some cases, it's not justified. 'There are some well run home school programs.' (Reeve, Article, Local weekly newspaper)

The practice of homeschooling through church-run schools.

Families are pooling large numbers, taking their children to some form of community hall, where education is delivered. (Deputy Premier, Article, Local weekly newspaper)

While the comments in the preceding section focus on the home education system as it is normally perceived in Alberta, that of a parent educating his/her own child(ren) in their own home, the media pieces reveal that this is not the only form of homeschooling that Low German Mennonites take part in, nor even the most common. The same article that quoted the local politician's letter to the government attempted to describe the schools that are set up by local churches. It explained how many Mennonite parents assert their right to home educate by sending their children *"to 'congregated sites' set up by the community – all with the help of provincial funding." (Reporter, Article, Regional daily newspaper)* The churches were assisted in their efforts by a private Christian school that registered the students with the government and supplied their materials. According to the article, more than 300 of the Low-German Mennonite students registered as home educated with this organization attended one of the two 'congregated sites' set up in this manner. The principal of the private school conceded that *"these sites are established by parents and supervisors are hired, although they typically do not have a Grade 12 education." (Article, Regional daily newspaper)*

The article employed previous provincial achievement test scores in its attempt to describe the quality of the education received at these facilities: *"on the 2011 Grade 3 English Language Arts PATs, just 14.3% of students at the congregated sites reached the acceptable standard, compared with 81% province-wide" (Reporter, Article, Regional daily newspaper).* These statistics were mitigated by the principal responsible for the sites who claimed that those

numbers didn't *"tell the story because the PAT exams test Alberta curriculum, whereas the home-school students are learning a Christian Light curriculum developed in the United States." (Article, Regional daily newspaper)*

The format of the church-run schools as described by the news article was underscored by Isabelle's account of her three years in one of those facilities:

> *Yeah, well the church school had a way different curriculum. It was easier. And harder in a way because you had to learn German also. You worked on your own a lot … There was one day a week you had a German class. You were direct taught that day. And the rest of the time you just, first in the morning you sang and prayed and then you took out your books and just did your own thing … And the teachers, no offense, they didn't really know what they were doing. Because most of them never even got their diploma. Some of them just got their GED. And some were never educated in English. [The teachers] didn't really care if you know the meaning of the word and they don't really care if you get your diploma. Long as you do your schoolwork. [The Christian Light books] are really easy. There's no thinking involved … most of the stuff was just yes, no answer. Like, really easy stuff … if you needed help you could go to the teacher and ask. You had to mark your own stuff though. (Isabelle, Interview)*

Even with such a simple curriculum, Isabelle noted that there were instances of students in the church-run school being put into lower grades than their age would require. *"Cause students, they're sometimes, they're 14 already they're still doing Grade 5 work. Yeah, there was one student I remember. Well, they just came here from Mexico."* Apparently students were placed into grades according to their ability levels as determined by the school's supervisors rather than by their ages.

When asked why she chose to move to her current public school she responded that

> *part of the reason is I really want to get my diploma and at that school you can only go 'til you're like 14, 15 and then you gotta start doing home*

school and home school doesn't seem that fun to me. Most students just kind of fall off from that, after they're like 16. (Isabelle, Interview)

Financial constraints must have also been a significant factor that played into her family's decision to move all of their children back into the public education system after three years away from it. As Isabelle succinctly states, she was in her current public school because the church-run school *"is really expensive. We couldn't really afford it anymore."* The prohibitive expense associated with these schools is reinforced by Judy as she discussed her family's decision to send her and her siblings to the public school rather than the church-run school near her town: *"there is a German school but it was very expensive. So we chose this one."*

Schooling in Mexico.

I don't know why but in Mexico [boys and girls], they're always split and like, I think you should communicate with guys and girls. And in Mexico it's constantly split. You can't have gym class with girls or guys, you have to sit on either sides of the room. (Agatha, Interview)

Judy was the only participant who had direct experience in a Mennonite school in Mexico, upon which the church-run model in Alberta is primarily based. Her account of being educated in Mexico stands in stark contrast to her previous descriptions of her current educational experiences.

First of all, in Mexico the schooling is very limited, compared to these Canadian schools. And well, I could only go for like 6 years, that's like, well, you'd graduate when you were 11. There was no graduation party or anything, it's just I stopped going to school. Yeah, I was totally finished with that. And while I really wanted to go further but then I'd have to go to a Spanish school and of course we had to pay a lot and we couldn't afford that … most of the literature came from the Bible so we pretty much spent all our time in the Bible and some basic math – very, very, very basic. And we practiced writing a lot, like fancy writing, you know, handwriting. That's about it. Oh, and we had free time of course too. (Judy, Interview)

While the other participants had not experienced this system personally, their familiarity with it was indicated through comments made by three of the four remaining students. When asked about their parents' views of education, these participants, along with Judy, ended up speaking about their parents' educational histories. Agatha disclosed that her dad never attended school at all because he was expected to stay at home to help. Her mother *"only went to Grade 3, I think."* Her parents' experiences were quite extreme, even in the Mexican system, as the other parents discussed had completed the traditional, obligatory 6 or 7 years of schooling.

Those years did not seem to be very beneficial for Judy's father as she explained that *"it was very hard for him to learn new stuff and the teachers handled it by punishing him so he never had any passion for education or anything so he rather stays away from education."* Her mother, on the other hand, *"loves reading and everything. She had a very good teacher. Her father and her brother were both her teachers … she loves knowledge."* Even though Eva's dad went to school, his experience was limited, like the other fathers described. She believes that her parents appreciate that she is getting an education

> *because they never had one really. My dad, he got maybe, I think he said he only went to like Grade 6 when he was younger, if even. But also he didn't go to school that much because he had to work [in the fields]. And help his dad with everything, yeah. (Eva, Interview)*

Such experiences with education shed light on some of the cultural beliefs regarding education that have likely caused many Low German Mennonite parents to embrace the homeschooling/church-run method for their own children in Alberta. Savanna's take on her parents' educational backgrounds suggests that those histories can also influence them to seek out more education for their children, however. When asked what she thought education might mean to her parents, she replied,

> *I'm sure that it's changed a lot. [It meant] nothing. Well, my parents went to school 'til like Grade 6. And then 'oh well, I went to school. Big deal.' And they didn't have shop or cooking or Social or Science. They didn't*

have any of that and they didn't even think that it was important, right? Or I guess they didn't even know about it. But now, they see that we kind of need it. Well, yeah, we need it because [my brother] has a good job and he gets paid well and people without the diploma, well, they just, they can get a good job but it's kind of harder. (Savanna, Interview)

She believes that it was likely living in Alberta that encouraged her parents to change their minds about the importance of education and she acknowledged that *"even now in Mexico [people] don't think that but here in Canada, I mean, there's – it's way different from what they grew up with." (Savanna, Interview)*

Cultural Preservation

You don't really learn German in school. Just keep learning English and eventually no one will ever know Plattdeutsch anymore. Or practice the beliefs. (Isabelle, Interview)

The extreme contrast between life in Mexico (or what the participants' parents 'grew up with') and in Alberta seems to encourage many Mennonite parents to search for ways to hold onto their traditional beliefs and customs, even while clinging to the hopes they may hold for improved educational opportunities for their children. Some of their centuries-old convictions have been transferred to their children, while others appear to be more disposable in the minds of the younger generation. The influence of school is significant in this as it can either work to promote culture as a valued aspect of one's identity or it can serve to undermine culture, even unintentionally.

As the above quote indicates, there is fear among the Low German population that their culture, which has been steadfastly maintained for generations, may be lost with the inclusion of their children in public education. Even some of the participants themselves, like Isabelle, expressed concern over the loss of their culture. She felt that it was important to maintain the basic tenets of the faith and culture that she was raised in and to pass on the Low German language to future generations. Savanna supported this idea by stating that *"language is a big part of culture and if the language is gone the culture is, like, it's pretty much gone too."* She also expressed her parents' desire to *"keep our*

traditions, like going to church every Sunday, keeping our traditional clothes as you can tell," indicating the dress she was wearing at the time of the interview that stuck to cultural norms. Savanna was content to continue wearing such dresses in spite of past experiences with discrimination in regards to this physical representation of her culture. She spoke of how her parents wouldn't want her to go to the regular public high school because she would likely dress 'English' and *"like they say, the Mennonites, they're just gonna be gone. Or not gone but … the next generation you won't be able to tell the difference between Mennonites and anyone else." (Savanna, Interview)*

Savanna was not the only participant who still donned the typical, modest, flowered dress on most school days. Isabelle and Eva joined her in this practice, at least on the days that they were interviewed. Not surprisingly, it was these three, all students at the same school, who indicated the most concern for maintaining traditions. The other two participants were both in more 'English'-style clothing – jeans and hoodies – that did not give away their cultural background quite so readily. These participants seemed to be less anxious about the destruction of the Low German Mennonite ways, demonstrating that fears regarding potential cultural loss are not unfounded. When asked about whether school had changed her, Judy responded:

> *Yeah, it has changed me. Well, first of all I dress different. That's not very important I think. And mostly, well, now that we know English we talk at home more English which we would never do before since we didn't know the language. (Judy, Interview)*

Agatha, meanwhile, was relatively untroubled by the prospective loss of Plattdeutsch. She revealed that she was starting to lose her ability to speak Low German but that she wasn't concerned by it *"because I never speak it at home. And if we do we mix it with English which is normal at my house."*

Even though Eva, Isabelle, and Savanna all expressed their wishes for the perpetuation of their culture, they were willing to concede that some aspects of that very culture were perhaps no longer relevant to daily life. Isabelle explained it this way:

> *I do think there's some things you can let go of though. Well, like the no technology rule. That doesn't really work in today's world. There's this place in Mexico. People still didn't have trucks there or they didn't. They have little irrigation or equipment and they're just really poor and starving. They need to adjust so they can have a better quality of life. (Isabelle, Interview)*

She was also disapproving of some of the beliefs surrounding education that others connected to her held. Apparently her grandparents were not very supportive of her schooling pursuits. *"They think a girl should get ready to get married or something. Well, that's what my grandma thinks but my grandpa says you should get a job."* In addition, her aunt *"thinks that you don't mature. If you go to school you stay like a kid or something." (Isabelle, Interview)* Savanna reinforced Isabelle's grandmother's belief by affirming that *"parents don't find the need for girls to go to school … parents think girls should just be at home and be a mom."*

Others shared Isabelle's criticism of the more traditional Mennonite views of education which call for children to have left school by the time they reach adolescence. Judy revealed that

> *there are people who don't believe that much in high education…they kind of think that when you are high educated, the more highly educated you get the more pride that you will have, pride of yourself… You'll think yourself superior to others and that's kind of what they try to avoid. Well, some think themselves superior by not having that much education knowledge. (Judy, Interview)*

Her insight into this irony is profound.

Despite recognizing such discrepancies between what they believed and what others of their ethnic background (sometimes even of their extended families) held to be true, generally the participants readily identified themselves as Mennonites. Agatha was perhaps the exception to this as she never actually referred to herself as such but rather explained that she was a child of Low German Mennonite parents. In contrast, Eva's reaction to the query of whether

school was changing her reveals that her identity is firmly rooted in the Mennonite culture. *"No, I mean being a Mennonite, it's just who I am, who I was born into."* Similarly, when asked if she was proud to be a Mennonite, Savanna replied

> *yeah, I am. And my parents want us to keep that part of us. I mean, they're really happy that I know my English language and I go to school but at home to my parents I will always talk German. (Savanna, Interview)*

School: Cultural friend or foe?

Everyone around me, well, they accept us for what we are. We're accepted … Though we still learn what everyone else does but we can still be ourselves. (Savanna, Interview)

It appears that school experiences can both help and hinder the bid to hold onto one's cultural beliefs and practices. Savanna's particular school seems to be doing a commendable job of ensuring her comfort in being herself within its walls. Her earlier statement that she likely would not wear traditional Low German dresses if she had to attend the local, mainstream high school attests to the fact that this is not always the case. Fears of being teased, shunned, or mistreated could convince students to adapt to 'English' ways in order to avoid such conflict, thus shedding some of their cultural identity in the process.

Isabelle senses that *"in some ways school kind of encourages you to break the traditional rules and values and beliefs. Gives you more opportunities. It puts more importance on education…you don't really learn German in school."* Schools, then, are in a precarious position as their attempts to enhance students' opportunities can pull students away from their historical and cultural ties. Finding a balance is a challenge for public schools that seek to retain their Mennonite students but it is a necessary endeavor from Eva's perspective. She believes that a school should not work to change its students but should actually enhance individual's cultural identities: *"Well, Canada's become multicultural so, being, like knowing another language, being different is cool. It's kinda cool because, like, you can just embrace it." (Eva, Interview)*

Discrimination and discriminating. That difference has not always been easy to embrace according to the participants' own recollections. Eva's previous quote ended with her stating, *"I mean [in this town], yeah, we get discriminated quite a bit."* She acknowledged that sometimes the actions of individual Mennonites work to perpetuate stereotypes of the whole cultural group. *"It's kinda like how if some Mennonites do something bad it kinda gives us all a bad name. It ruins the reputation for us all, kind of. But I mean, it happens in other cultures as well."* These experiences contrast vividly with her memories of living in the United States, even though she was several years younger then. *"When I lived in the States we were, like, they wouldn't even think that being a Mennonite was really different at all. We were all treated equally and all got along really well." (Eva, Interview)*

Savanna and Isabelle spoke of previous incidents of discrimination, both in other public school settings and in daily life outside of the classroom. Savanna disclosed that sometimes when she and her classmates travelled to the high school for their specialized courses they experienced intolerance from others. There is a reaction that she referred to: *"'oh look, there's Mennonites.' But it doesn't really bother me."* Isabelle identified those responses as well when she stated *"even if they don't say anything they just give you that look, like, 'um, gee, I'm so much better than you.'"* Such occurrences have certainly left their marks on these students and could potentially coax them to let go of some of their cultural ties and physical representations if those aspects are not shown to be valued by others.

This valuing of the Low German Mennonite culture in schools could encourage youth to willingly embrace their cultural identities in meaningful ways and allow them to speak out about discrimination with confidence. This possibility became evident at the end of Isabelle's interview when I asked if she had any questions for me. Without hesitation she replied, *"yeah, I would just like to know why are people, like, mean towards Mennonites? And dislike them?"* This initiated a conversation about discrimination, something that she estimates every Mennonite person has encountered at some point in life. Her assessment of the stratification of society in southern Alberta boiled down to the notion *"that if we*

were just like them [Englishers] the world would just be boring." (Isabelle, Interview) While she did admit that some Mennonites discriminated against others as well, her critique of prejudices overall was a significant disclosure of her own personal beliefs. In light of the traditional gender and cultural norms of behaviour for Low German Mennonite girls, Isabelle's line of questioning reveals a refreshing boldness and thirst to understand the world around her and her place in it.

Encouraging such confidence in Mennonite youth could augment both parental and participant concerns regarding schools' effects on cultural change. Embracing aspects of cultural identity that are personally meaningful to them could allow students to perpetuate the Mennonite culture as they see fit. Isabelle's outspokenness highlights the need for schools to become not just culturally-sensitive, but culturally-empowering environments for these students.

Summary of Findings

The data presented in this chapter reveals that Low German Mennonite students' plans for the future are often tempered by their current realities. Although participants spoke hopefully of completing high school and finding an appealing career, data revealed that school, family life, and work all impacted both the students' and the non-participants' educational experiences in significant, and sometimes unalterable, ways. Even though parents may have been encouraging of or a least neutral towards schooling, the reality of financial burdens frequently caused students to miss school for long periods of time. From the perspectives of those in the media pieces, this very situation often resulted in the departure of many youth from the educational system altogether.

Another factor that was seen as a sizable contributor to the loss of Low German Mennonite youth from public educational institutions was that of prior experiences and understandings of schooling. The historical context of the culture can have great impacts on the decisions that parents make about their children's education. The availability of public schools, home education, or private church-run schools ensure that parents have ample opportunity to embrace their right to

choose their children's education. The choices made can have lasting effects on Low German Mennonite youth.

While the details presented in this chapter are significant in their own right, it is important to circle back to the original research questions upon which this study rests in order to fully comprehend their significance. The ensuing chapter will utilize critical children's rights as a means of examining the data collected in light of the research questions which were:

- What are Low German Mennonite youths' perceptions of educational success?
- What factors do they see as inhibiting that success?
- How do they see their school experiences as impacting that success?

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION – IN PURSUIT OF BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILD

Although the use of child labour on farming operations and the practice of homeschooling in southern Alberta is widely known, Low German Mennonite children and youth are at present individually invisible from mainstream society's watchful gaze. This is apparent in the sheer difficulty of obtaining non-school attending participants for this study. Rather than being viewed as individuals worthy of the upholding of their rights, they are instead lumped into a collective which serves to cloak them under both economic and cultural coverings. While some may be happy with the anonymity this brings, their ability to care for themselves later in life may be hampered by their current circumstances, and thus needs to be considered critically.

Such individuals are made invisible through the agricultural industry's reliance on Mennonite youth, thus providing an economic method of concealing them from the public's view. At present, agricultural producers contribute to the $6 billion provincial agri-food industry (see Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development, 2013) and would likely be unable to produce inexpensive food for the tables of not just Albertans, but all the regions to which it exports, without these young workers. Their status as a culture separate from the mainstream serves to differentiate Low German Mennonite children enough as to make the preservation of culture a convenient rationale for the utilization of these children as a source of labour. By claiming that mainstream society has no right to force members of this cultural group to change their beliefs by making them go to school as other children are expected to, the use of child labour is legitimized and Low German Mennonite youth can continue to populate farmsites during harvest with little ethical friction.

This 'respect for difference' rationale also allows for the use of church-run schools to support the education of these youth, which may or may not adequately prepare them for a life much different than that of their parents. Therefore, this deliberation will utilize a critical children's rights framework to focus on aspects that hinder the educational attainment of Low German Mennonite youth. This will

be followed by a discussion about the positive ways in which these same youth are being aided towards this end and how they can be made visible in order to ensure the protection of their fundamental human rights (Shultz, 2008). Prior to that, a word about the students' conceptions of success would be a worthwhile venture.

Understanding Participants' Ideas of Success

When evaluating the meanings that these youth attribute to educational success, they are not noticeably different from what one would expect of youth from any other cultural group. Obtaining a high school diploma dominated the list of goals that participants discussed and was seen by all as a baseline for any desirable future job prospects. This belief was also represented through many of the comments in the media pieces and certainly aligns with that of both the provincial and federal governments (see Alberta Education, 2009; Statistics Canada and CMEC, 2010). Whether these particular students came to believe this through their own experiences or from what mainstream society told them – through teachers, media, friends – is unclear and perhaps insignificant. The fact that these youth value graduating from high school, possibly attending college, and obtaining a rewarding career indicates that their goals are not markedly different than the aspirations that other youth have. Rather, it is the daily realities that many of these youth face that can separate them from their non-Mennonite peers.

What is also unique is the lack of specific career goals that these particular individuals have outlined for themselves in regards to the future. By the age of 15 or 16, it might be expected that students would have more detailed plans in regards to their post-high school lives. The absence of specificities with all but one participant was initially surprising. The fact that all of the interviewed participants were females may have highlighted this aspect more readily than if males had been accounted for in the data. Without the ability to compare across gender, it was perhaps easier to recognize that the vagueness of their goals may be a result of the cultural and gender norms into which Mennonite youth are socialized. As noted previously, girls have historically been trained for two

specific roles in life – that of wife and mother. Just because these youth are growing up in Alberta, the cultural norms of their heritage are likely still greatly impacting their identities as females and the roles they are expected to play as such. This would make the absence of delineated goals somewhat more understandable as girls were probably encouraged, both consciously and subconsciously, to think about the future in terms of marriage and motherhood rather than work. It is interesting to note that goals involving marriage and family were left out of discussions with participants, perhaps not being seen as included in the realm of 'educational success' and thus a potential flaw in the study.

Interestingly, when participants did mention possible careers, those goals were generally gendered in nature, as was the case in Judy's dream of becoming a nurse. The desire that participants had of obtaining jobs that 'helped others' might also be considered to fall along traditionally female lines. Even though Eva suggested that it was helpful for girls to take shop class as they might want to enter a trade, none of the participants interviewed seemed interested in this stereotypically masculine path. This would suggest that even when individuals contemplated life outside the Mennonite 'box' of marriage and motherhood, they were still bound, consciously or otherwise, by cultural norms of gender.

Impacts of Current Experiences on Educational Attainment

Despite this lack of definition in terms of future goals, participants clearly articulated their desires to complete high school and free themselves of the necessity of relying on 'cheap jobs' such as grading potatoes in the future. This makes it important to contemplate whether their current life experiences are ensuring that they have the opportunity to attain their desired levels of success. To do so, the ways in which both work and home education impact the goals that Low German Mennonite young people set for themselves must be addressed. The ways that public schools can both help and hinder youth in such quests are also vital to such a discussion.

Work As a Barrier/Work As a Virtue

According to the data, the most intrusive factor that impedes Mennonite youths' advancement in education is work. Even though farm work is often

limited to specific times of the year (ie. seeding time, harvest, shipping out of potatoes), the physicality and longevity of the work done can limit students' access to school. Individuals work extremely long days with minimal time for meal breaks or to simply rest tired bodies. This work continues for several weeks at the beginning of each school year, requiring youth who may wish to continue their educations to miss a significant portion of class time. It is not unrealistic to assume that some individuals would refrain from returning to school once harvest has wrapped up for the year, thus moving into the realm of the invisible. This would be especially plausible if their school was not sympathetic to the circumstances of working Low German Mennonite youth.

Perhaps the most shocking aspect of this form of child labour is that such practices are legal under Alberta legislation. Historical legal exemptions that have been preserved with the intention of protecting the 'family farm' serve to tie Mennonite youth to menial agricultural labour, potentially for much of their lives. By allowing for immunity from the *Employment Standards Code* for the agricultural industry, the Alberta government is essentially endorsing this child labour. The lack of applicable provincial regulations to protect these young workers from such exploitation is clearly in violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child to which Canada is bound as a signatory. To begin with, the best interests principle (*Convention of the Rights of the Child*, Article 3) dictates that the best interests of a child, both presently and in the future, must be a primary consideration in any decision which impacts that child. It is therefore important to consider how the work described in the previous chapter contributes to or infringes upon those best interests in light of the CRC.

Article 32 calls upon governments to protect children from economic exploitation and "from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development" (*Convention of the Rights of the Child,* Article 32(1)). It could be surmised that the agricultural work that Mennonite youth engage in is harmful in several ways. Without doubt it interferes with education by requiring school-age children to work during (and

beyond) school hours for several weeks at a time, potentially causing them to fall behind their non-working peers in terms of academics. In addition, long days with little rest could be detrimental to the healthy development of these individuals. The dangers associated with farm work – increased potential for injuries and both short-term and long-term illness and health issues (see again Barnetson, 2009a, 2013; CAISP, 2007; Coursen-Neff, 2010) – suggest that young workers' health and physical well-being are at risk due to the tasks they are asked to perform. Inadequate reporting of injuries and work-related illnesses in the agricultural industry (CAISP, 2007) lead one to assume that issues are more common than current statistics would imply, creating further concern for youth employed in this industry.

The CRC also mandates that states take action to encourage both primary and secondary aged children to attend school regularly and enhance measures that reduce the rate at which young people drop out of formal schooling (*Convention of the Rights of the Child,* Article 28(1e)). In the case of Mennonite youth, this would require that governments ensure that the work young individuals engage in does not prejudice their school attendance in any way. Current provincial legislation is in fact working against this. Child labour is presently utilized under *Employment Standards Code* exemptions for 'primary agricultural operations' and is further exacerbated by Alberta's *School Act*. This statute actually requires children between the ages of six and 16 to be present in school whenever it is in session (*School Act,* Section 13(1c)).[6] However, the *Act* permits a student to be excused from school attendance "if the student is unable to attend by reason of sickness or other unavoidable cause" (Section 13(5)), wording which remains unchanged in the new *Education Act* (Section 7(4a)). "Unavoidable cause has been linked to the right to family survival" by working on the family farm and would allow for students to miss school (C. Gilmore, personal communication, April 4, 2011). This clause likely stems from the province's agricultural roots

[6]The minimum school leaving age will be increased to 17 with the anticipated proclamation of Alberta's new *Education Act*. See *Education Act*, Section 7(1)c for the details about compulsory education and Legislative Assembly of Alberta, 2012 for information regarding the Act coming into force.

when farm kids were required to help during important times of the agricultural calendar. Ironically, in the case of the employment of Mennonite youth, the children of these farmers are almost always in school while the employees are working to complete seeding or harvest for the farm families. The legitimacy of this claim that students need to miss school in order to ensure the continuation of the family farm seems questionable, particularly if it is not their farm to begin with.

Marginalization of Low German Mennonite youth. Such practices appear to further separate Mennonite youth from their non-Mennonite peers, including those children whose farms they are employed on. The fact that many Mennonite youth are willing to lend a hand to their families by earning paycheques which are then turned over to their parents is quite commendable. Surely there are families that absolutely rely on this income in order to hover near the poverty line. The extent to which this work is necessary could be debated however. While many Low German Mennonite families rely on their children's income to survive, this is not always the case. Sometimes these individuals are working to prop up family finances that are not necessarily in such dire circumstances.[7] What of these youth? Is it acceptable for these youth to miss large amounts of school in order to simply increase their family's quality of life? On the other hand, why is it acceptable for those who are truly living in poverty to forego some or all of their education because of a perceived 'duty' to help their families cope with poverty, a duty often placed on them by the expectations of others?

Rather than simply advocating for children's right to work in the name of lifting their families out of poverty, it should be considered whether this argument simply serves to further marginalize poor children. If this principle can be readily applied to all children, allowing those from middle- and upper-income brackets to participate in work to the same degree and in the same category as their low-income peers, the right to work argument may have some validity. After all, if work is how poor children are expected to gain self-esteem, work should serve

[7] Information based on author's prior knowledge.

that same function for other children, including those farm kids who are in school during harvest days.

Some positive aspects of work are evident in the data from this study and must be acknowledged. Participants appeared to identify themselves as helpful to their families when they engaged in paid work and were willing, if not always eager, to assist in this way. This loyalty to the family unit reveals them to be less individualistic than youth are stereotypically perceived to be. Their ability to participate as actors within both their family and the economy in a meaningful way may indeed raise their self-esteem, as children's right to work advocates maintain (see again Liebel, 2004; Myers & Boyden, 1998; Bequele & Boyden, 1988). However, it has been noted that youths' feelings of "initial enthusiasm to contribute to the family later evolved to despair in the face of such tedious, grueling, and poorly paid" agricultural work (Coursen-Neff, 2010, p. 31). This would correlate with participants' desire to find freedom from 'those cheap jobs' (potato grading in particular) through obtaining a high school diploma. While they may have been willing to engage in such family supports at the time of their interviews, the participants by no means wanted to work in that capacity any longer than necessary. This could be read as a warning to those who continue to advocate for children's right to work when it interferes with educational access. If these youth are unable to complete high school, they may find themselves employed in the agricultural industry much longer than they hoped to be, potentially resulting in increased drop-out rates or experiences of poverty as adults.

The absence of farm kids working alongside their Mennonite peers during school days would imply that the benefits of work as described are not seen as vital for all children or that some are capable of securing those benefits in other ways. As such, it is important to recognize that the cultural card that is wielded in the debate of working Mennonite youth is often the dividing line between those who must work and those who must be educated. Because of Low German Mennonites' historical rejection of public education, the fact that many of their

children are not in school has to date been a method of legitimizing child labour in the agricultural industry.

Moving towards child labour legislation. Local officials of these rural regions appear to be recognizing this and are taking exception to the use of the 'family farm' loophole described above. The reeve's question as to the significance of children's right to an education versus the rights of their parents to bring up their children in the manner of their choosing would suggest that he perceives these children to be equal to those of the mainstream culture. As such, they would be equally as deserving of both provision of education and protection from economic exploitation as all other children in this region.

Perhaps surprisingly, agricultural producers are joining the call to create boundaries for the use of child labour within the industry. During the course of this study, the Wild Rose Agricultural Producers (WRAP) passed a "resolution in support of child-labour standards for all paid child workers in the province" with the intention of asking the provincial government to align agricultural child labour practices with those of other industries (Article, Local weekly newspaper).[8] It is important to note that WRAP is not seeking to eliminate child labour but to alter legislation which would possibly make it fall in line with Article 32 of the CRC. WRAP was also very clear that such standards would not apply to children working on their own family farms but rather to those who are hired by farmers as paid labourers. The government later "closed the barn door on new farm safety legislation" that would have implemented child labour standards and workers' compensation for the agricultural industry (Article, Regional daily newspaper).[9] While agricultural producers are willing to implement child labour legislation, the provincial government is putting the brakes on such action, citing the need for further consultation before imposing laws upon 'family farms'.

Agricultural producers lobbying the government to impose child labour standards on their industry would likely be construed as a positive step towards

[8] Information included here stems from a media piece collected as data and is cited in this manner to protect the identity of study participants by withholding the name of the town in which the newspaper is situated.
[9] See note 8.

protecting young workers. The concern WRAP shows in regards to being present at the table during legislation discussions raises the issue of their motives, however. Do the employers truly have the best interests of their child workers in mind? Are they instead hoping to have the greatest influence on any decisions that are made in order to protect their farming operations? Or are they simply looking to improve the image of an industry that received bad press in previous months by advocating for child labour regulations?

The implementation of child labour standards is undoubtedly an important step in the move towards the best interests of children and as such should be commended. Including those children at the table where these discussions occur would be an even better method of ensuring that those interests are truly represented in any forthcoming legislation. Such an action would also put Article 12 of the CRC into practice as it requires government bodies to

> assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all manners affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (*Convention of the Rights of the Child*, Article 12(1)).

Allowing child labourers to be part of the dialogue when forming new legislation, particularly that which impacts them more than any other parties involved, could help in the formulation of standards which better protect both their interests and their well-being, now and into the future. Providing for any assistance to such participants to guarantee that their voices are heard and considered in the midst of a roomful of adults would do much to ensure that such participation is not mere tokenism. This avenue of participation would also help to make visible the child workers who presently populate southern Alberta farms.

'Home Education'[10]

Not all Low German Mennonite children will be made visible through the implementation of child labour standards though. Home education also serves to hide children and youth as it is one way in which Mennonite parents can

[10] In this discussion, home education refers to both homeschooling as it is traditionally understood and the 'congregated sites' that Mennonite churches use as described in Chapter 5.

circumvent the public education system. By accessing education at home or through church-run schools under the auspices of homeschooling, parents are asserting their right to choose their children's education and potentially preserve their culture in the process. This fully aligns with the *School Act* which lists "a parent providing a home education program" as a category of school type (Section 1(1y[iv])). A core concept of home education maintains that "parents have the right to choose an education for their children consistent with their religious and conscientiously held beliefs" (Alberta Education, 1994, p. 1) and is reflected in the *Home Education Regulation* that outlines home education practices for the province.

Data collected for this study suggests that the rights that parents have in making such decisions can conflict with the rights of their children in accessing education that intends to prepare them "for responsible life in a free society" (*Convention of the Rights of the Child*, Article 29 1(d)). Members of the public and some of the participants themselves noted that both homeschooling as it is traditionally perceived in Alberta (parents educating their children in the home) and through church-run schools, as is commonly practiced by the Mennonite community, seem to ill-equip young people for adult life in this province. Both parties agreed that completion of high school appears to be necessary for youth wishing to obtain viable employment as they move into their adult years. The methods of homeschooling currently being adopted by Low German Mennonites do not allow students to acquire a high school diploma that is recognized by the provincial government,[11] possibly hindering their future transition into the workplace. Furthermore, the descriptions of the education that is being provided through these systems raise questions as to the quality of the programming, curriculum, and instruction that occurs. Student learning within such locations may not actually be preparing youth for a future in Alberta but tying them to the customs of a past that is no longer viable even in Mexico according to the

[11] While the private school that serves as the supervising body to the congregated sites as described in the preceding chapter claims to provide a complete high school program, 'graduates' of the program do not qualify for a high school diploma through Alberta education. Homeschooled students who are registered in accredited high school programs are able to earn a diploma that is recognized by the Alberta government. Information based on author's experience.

literature as articulated in Chapter 2. While many of those traditions are certainly valuable and important for the continuance of the culture, upholding the rights of the children involved would require careful consideration of how they will be able to participate in society as adults due to the education received in this manner.

Moving towards home education regulations? The belief on the part of some Albertans that these forms of education are in fact not adequately preparing Low German Mennonite youth for adulthood in Alberta has resulted in a call for increased accountability in the realm of homeschooling regulations. The study data revealed that both local government officials and citizens alike believed that Mennonite parents chose to homeschool their children as a means of keeping them out of the public education system while giving them the freedom to send their children to work during school days. Not only does this reveal the complex relationship between work and home education as they relate to the Low German Mennonite community, it also shows that the "interests of children and their parents are not necessarily aligned" (Barnetson, 2009b, p. 33). This idea was echoed by Agatha who speculated *that "parents are gonna do something that benefits them, not their kid" (Agatha, Interview)*. The correlation between drop-out rates and future employment issues as outlined in Chapter 3 would suggest that children who are required to abandon viable systems of education, for whatever reason, will likely receive fewer future benefits than their peers. This has the potential to further marginalize an already vulnerable group.

There is increased difficulty when dealing with homeschooling regulations in that this particular topic brings about an incredible political will backed by those who advocate for home education. The parental autonomy that the *Home Education Regulation* currently allows for in terms of aspects such as programming (Section 3) and student evaluation (Section 4) is fiercely defended by proponents of homeschooling. That was proven when home education became an issue during the last provincial election and the Deputy Premier revealed that *"some 2,000 [homeschoolers] showed up at the legislature to visit me" (Article, Local weekly newspaper)*.[12] Because of this unyielding defense of home

[12]See note 8.

education, any discussion regarding changes to the regulation of it brings forth many individuals throughout the continent, let alone the province, who actively promote their rights to choose and provide their children's education.

Here as well, the provincial government seems reluctant to rock the regulation boat as it pertains to home education. Despite calls for clarification to legislation by both municipal governments and school boards, no changes have been made to either homeschooling accountability measures or to the regulation itself. This could be due to the strength of the homeschool lobby movement as revealed during the last election. However, it could also come about because of sheer economics. With per student funding for home educated students at half the rate of students who attend a local public school, the provincial government would be investing much less money into homeschooled children's education. Further cost savings occur when the churches that run the congregated sites utilized by many Low German Mennonites provide their own buildings, electricity, and maintenance, which are paid for by the churches who recoup the money through tuition fees. Taking these children out of these institutions and placing them in public schools would put those costs back onto the government, something it seems reluctant to take on at this point.

It is possible that these costs may eat away at the government's purse eventually though. If the education that these children are receiving during their youth is found lacking, these individuals may find themselves unemployable in the future, particularly if the agricultural-related occupations they currently take on end up obsolete due to changing times and technologies. In such cases, these adults may turn to government programs for further education and retraining, along with other social assistance. Adults returning to school are costly ventures for taxpayers. Wages for participants as well as the trainers, buildings in which to house adult education programs, specific resource materials, and more individualized, one-on-one teaching all add to the bill of such programs, a bill likely paid by various levels of government. It would seem to be more cost-efficient for Mennonite youth to continue their educations when they are young as schools are already in existence (and often under-utilized in rural Alberta) and

teachers, materials, and resources are readily available. Perhaps the provincial government is content to defray those costs to the future and to a federal government that has historically helped to fund adult retraining programs. That plan does not serve the needs of today's children, however, and infringes upon their rights to an education that adequately prepares them for a future where they can both care for their families and contribute to the economy of the province. Recognizing children's rights in this instance would require not just improving home education legislation in terms of holding parents and church-run school providers accountable for the education being provided, but enforcing the regulations consistently for every homeschooled student in the province.

School Impacts

The ways in which public schools respond to the disruptions brought forth by both work and the atypical methods of education utilized by Mennonite parents can further hinder educational attainment of the youth in question. Schools that are not understanding of the transitory nature of the population will likely by frustrated with the periodic student absences for work, assisting at home, or travels to visit relatives. Without an awareness and appreciation for the experiences of these youth, teachers and school administrators may find themselves at odds with both the students and their parents. By showing acceptance of the sporadic attendance of Mennonite children and youth, schools can ensure that these students will have a welcoming environment to return to once work commitments are over.

The issue of discrimination seems to have a serious effect on the willingness of youth to continue with their schooling and even to maintain their cultural traditions. Some participants described previous experiences where they felt looked down upon because of their culture, to the point that they felt they would have to change their traditions (stop wearing dresses for example) if they were to continue in such schools. Schools that create a safe space for these youth to not just learn then, but to be themselves, appears to have a significant impact on their educational attainment. Without fear of being bullied or chastised because of their cultural heritage, youth are more likely to remain in school. School staff that

view the Low German Mennonite culture in a positive light and encourage students to not simply maintain traditions, but to understand the origins of these beliefs, will undoubtedly positively promote these customs and beliefs to the youth. This has the potential to enhance the cultural identity that binds these youth to the past while at the same time making them unique members of the larger society.

Providing students with the opportunities to enhance their German literacy skills and to learn about the Bible seems to be another way for schools to encourage cultural maintenance while creating a favourable learning environment for these youth. In addition, ensuring that students obtain skills that they see as being relevant to their lives, either now or in the future, can lessen the frustration that students feel in school. If students understand why they are learning the things being taught, they will likely have a greater willingness to remain in school when life circumstances may attempt to pull them away. Including students in a discussion of what is pertinent to their education can show them that their perspectives matter and have influence on the world around. Finally, forming personal, yet professional, relationships with students can provide them with one more caring adult in their life on whom they can rely, helping to make them feel like valued citizens within their schools.

Identity: Active Participants of Their Own Lives

It would be easy to see Mennonite youth as victims due to the circumstances that are presented through this study. The opinions given within the media pieces suggest that many people do view them in this way. It is heartening to note that these youth appear to have more agency than outsiders would attribute to them. The interviews reveal more complex circumstances in which at least two of the youth (Judy and Eva) appear to negotiate with their parents about school and work, coming to a 'deal' about how much time is spent in work in exchange for attending school. Their ability to communicate their desires to their parents and work towards a compromise reveals a maturity that may often be overlooked.

Isabelle's statement that she would grade potatoes for another season if her family needed her to also indicates a measure of decision-making power on her

part. This suggests that she is not simply a pawn being used by the adult world but an active participant who engages in conversations with her parents about what is in the best interests of their family unit. As the eldest child, she shows a great deal of responsibility towards her family and appears to want to be seen as a role model in regards to educational matters.

Several of the participants also revealed their willingness to negotiate their own identities in terms of which cultural traditions, beliefs, and values they wished to maintain in their own lives. The relative ease with which some of the students were able to decide upon the cultural aspects that were important to them show that they do not wish to merely perpetuate the culture as it has always been. This would imply a degree of thought and intention on their part, suggesting that they are not simply willing subjects of the culture, but that they are active members of their cultural/religious group as well as of their immediate families. The pride with which they assert their Mennonite heritage also indicates that they are not willing to forego their histories but wish to maintain their chosen aspects in their lives for as long as possible.

It is likely that the interview process that these youth participated in for this study contributed to their identity formation in some small way and speaks to the importance of doing research with children and youth. During the interviews, participants were able to clarify ideas and information for themselves, including the consideration of future goals and the significance of those plans for their lives. Similarly, the opportunity for individuals to state that they were proud to be Mennonite may have helped in their own understanding of their cultural identity and why that identity mattered to them and was worth holding onto. Other benefits of youth joining the interview process included gaining information (such as how to find out about requirements for specific career options) and garnering the perspective of another adult about a delicate but significant issue. The most notable example of the latter came through Isabelle's question about why Mennonites experienced so much discrimination at the hands of those in mainstream society. Such a pondering may not have seemed a safe query to someone more well-known to the student, like a member of the school staff, but

was pressing enough to ask a researcher who seemed interested in the experiences of Mennonite youth. It could be reasoned that simply asking this question to a relatively unknown adult showed a degree of confidence on the part of this participant that reveals her to be quite the opposite of the victim she may have been perceived to be.

The identity formation and perspectives of the youth who were not interviewed for this research are equally as significant, although unregistered by this study. The strength and maturity revealed by the participants in how they deal with their current situations indicates that these invisible youth may take a more active role in their own circumstances than is assumed. Knowing that for certain would require such individuals to be identified, so that their voices can be heard. Pulling them from the faceless mass could shed light on their current state of invisibility and actually protect them from having their rights infringed upon further (Shultz, 2008). As unknown entities, it is easier for society to ignore their needs and continue to exploit them with little moral misgivings. By uncovering them, the youth get a chance to share their experiences and the larger society gets the opportunity to learn from them. In addition, their perspectives could be a vital addition in the creation of policies designed to protect the rights of all Mennonite youth in the province.

Discussion Summary

Recognizing Low German Mennonite youth not as victims but as active and engaged participants in the world is vitally important when considering their rights in relation to their unique life experiences. While work and some forms of education can infringe upon their rights and must be acknowledged, their ability to act on their environment suggests that they have the knowledge and capacity to participate in any discussions that pertain to them. Child labour legislation, home education regulations, and general school practices would all benefit from the inclusion of Low German Mennonite children's perspectives. Involving youth in this way would help to address the best interests of this group as a whole while upholding pertinent aspects of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The

following chapter will provide a summary of this research report and suggest recommendations for action and further study.

CHAPTER 7: STUDY SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Study Summary

Although the presence of large numbers of Low German Mennonite youth within rural southern Alberta has been apparent for a number of years, the individual members of this group are much less detectable to the general public. Viewed as a faceless mass, these youth have remained relatively unseen, allowing for their rights to be infringed upon in a number of ways. This study attempted to uncover these youth from the economic and cultural cloaks that have been used to shield them from the public's gaze to date. This unveiling reveals that the educational experiences of these youth are greatly impacted by other aspects of their lives and must be studied in relation to the societal, cultural, educational, and familial contexts in which these young people function.

Culturally, Mennonite youth have been hidden from view for very particular reasons. The faith itself is based on a collective entity where standing out for any reason is viewed negatively, essentially encouraging such invisibility. The incredible list of historical migrations, intended to maintain the faith for generations, also assists with this collective identity where individuality is shunned. By choosing to move as a group, the needs of individuals were consistently placed behind those of the congregation. The separation between this group and their neighbours in all of their stopovers has further supported the continuance of the culture and bred a unique cultural identity for today's Low German Mennonites.

One might suggest that forcing these children out of this cultural shell in order to make them visible disrespects the traditions under which they have been raised and exposes them to a world for which they are not prepared. The current economic experiences that Mennonites face in both Mexico and Alberta would imply that their simple agrarian lifestyle is not viable in today's world though. As a result, children now have to make their way in a society that is vastly different from that of their ancestors, which has culminated in the exploitation of Mennonite children and youth, largely for the betterment of Alberta's agricultural industry. The respect for cultural difference rationale has only served to

perpetuate this problem as it legitimizes the use of these children as labour under the guise of cultural adherence. Such circumstances give merit to the claims that allowing children to remain invisible for any reason does little to actually protect them from exploitation and neglect. Rather, the notion that it is only by uncovering children that their rights are protected is given greater weight by the present-day experiences of these youth.

This uncovering of children is possible through the use of a critical children's rights lens when engaging in research with and about youth. Assessing the historical and cultural influences through this framework permits a critique of the situations in which young Mennonites currently find themselves. Centering the study on children's rights places youth at the heart of any discussions about them. Understanding both the theories and legislation involved in international children's rights debates ensures that the complexities associated with the education of these youth are addressed in relation to the rights that they hold as citizens. Not only does this framework allow for the study of the cultural context that Mennonite youth exist in, however. By considering the best interests of the child principle (*Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Article 3), youth experiences of work, school, poverty, and family can be revealed and discussed in light of what will bring about the most positive changes in the lives of children, both now and in the long run.

The contextual nature of these experiences was best suited to a qualitative approach to research. This would highlight how the various aspects of this phenomenon both impacted on and were impacted by one another. Student participants were interviewed and newspaper items were used in lieu of the invisible non-school attending participants. Data was then interpreted and separated into themes that helped to outline how Mennonite youth experienced education in relation to their complex existences.

Those themes highlighted the future aspirations that these youth had, the present experiences they were dealing with, and the past influences that shaped their cultural and individual identities. Planned futures embodied somewhat vague notions of completing high school and finding an enjoyable career and showed

that participants had not considered the future to a great extent. Perhaps they were more consumed by present-day pressures that included current school experiences and family ties and responsibilities, the latter of which often resulted in employment in exploitative forms of menial agricultural labour. Participants were also impacted by other types of schooling, such as homeschooling, church-run schools, and the traditional Mennonite education as is experienced in Mexico. These influences of the past were compounded by cultural concerns where both parents and youth worried about the loss of traditions, language, and beliefs due to the effects of youth being enrolled in public schools. Additionally, prior occurrences of discrimination played into current educational experiences as youth avoided schools where they felt looked down upon for their adherence to their faith. Instead of suffering silent stares and ostracism, participants either abandoned school, in the case of some of the invisible youth, or chose programs that catered to the unique needs and experiences of the Low German population.

Analyzing the experiences as described in the study findings through children's rights legislation reveals that educational and child labour policies put forth by the provincial government do not serve to protect the rights of Low German Mennonite youth. Most significantly, agricultural exemptions permit producers to hire children and youth to work throughout the school day thanks to a misguided attempt to preserve the family farm. Not only can this limit young people's access to education, it can also place them in harm's way. The ability of agricultural producers to bypass the *Employment Standards Code* means that safety regulations do not cover these young workers, potentially resulting in injury or even death. Such practices are condemned by both the UNCRC and ILO child labour conventions which are intended to protect the rights of children and youth. Although this form of employment is currently being debated in the province, to date, no policies have been changed or implemented in order to alter the current working situations that many youth find themselves in.

Educational loopholes permit Mennonites to choose from various types of education, even non-education, for their children, further affecting their educational attainment. It is believed that allowances for parents to home educate

their children essentially permit parents to make claims that they are homeschooling their children so that they can send them out to work. The *Home Education Regulation* that allows for this also appears to sanction the creation of church-run schools, although such programs would legally fall under the banner of private schools according to the *School Act*. While some may argue that these parents have the right to educate their children as they see fit, the education that is being received must be considered in light of children's rights, both presently and in the future.

The data from this study shows that there are youth who desire to remain in school and negotiate with their parents in order to do so, thus enacting rights that affect children in their current state. Such arrangements would imply that there may be others who are less successful in deliberations with their parents who are then forced from school, missing out on opportunities to engage in school with their peers. Not only does this affect youth at present, but their rights in relation to future job prospects may also be impacted by Alberta's education policies. There is the possibility that some forms of home education could be found wanting at a later time. If Mennonite youth are unsuccessful in their attempts to transition into adulthood in a society much different from that of their parents, the education that they received previously may be partly to blame, thus requiring the need to reassess the policies that permit it.

In spite of these sometimes harsh circumstances, Low German Mennonite youth appear to be well-positioned as active participants in their own lives. Considered to be victims by many, the youth interviewed actually expressed opinions and views that revealed them to be mindful, conscientious members of their families and community groups. This suggests that doing research with youth from this cultural group results in the discovery of pertinent, reliable information about their circumstances. Making these youth visible not only ensures that their rights will be better protected but that their perspectives are heard, as in this study. The information gleaned from research such as this can inform discussions about policy and regulations that affect the youth themselves. Providing Low German Mennonite youth with a seat at the table during such

debates would help to address the best interests of this group as a whole and would uphold international standards that call for children to have a say in the decisions that impact them.

Study Recommendations

In light of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are being put forward:

Policy Action:

- Child labour standards should be implemented by the Alberta provincial government after consultation with agricultural producers, municipal governments, school board representatives, and most importantly, child workers.
- Home education practices should be examined in terms of accountability on the part of home education providers. Suggestions for improvements to Alberta's *Home Education Regulation* should ensure that children's rights to education are adequately protected and should include the perspectives of children themselves.
- Opportunities for children's participation regarding decisions that affect their education need to protected and provided for by government, school boards, schools, and parents. Decisions would include, but not be limited to, those that address types of schooling, access to education, curriculum, programming, and cultural provisions. Such participation also needs to be properly supported in order to ensure that children's perspectives are genuinely heard and acted upon where appropriate and applicable.
- A parent's right to choose her/his child(ren)'s education should be balanced with the rights of the child(ren) themselves.

Practice and Pedagogy:

- Schools that provide culturally-relevant programming seem better able to retain Low German Mennonite students. Ensuring that students feel not just accepted, but embraced by their schools will help young people to feel part of a community that is outside of, yet tied to, their own cultural community.

- Continue to foster caring, professional relationships between teachers and students.
- Strive to ensure that programs do not further separate or marginalize Mennonite students from their non-Mennonites counterparts. While outreach schools serve the unique needs of their Mennonite students, such programs have the potential to cause further segregation. The benefits and consequences of these schools need to be considered with consultation from the youth themselves.

Further Research:

- Research into child labour practices in Alberta should consider the impacts of work on the lives, health, and educational attainment of young workers.
- The influence of gender on children's experiences of work (and vice versa) would reveal whether male and female children have distinct reasons for engaging in work and whether they are impacted differently by the work they undertake.
- The impacts of home education on the educational experiences of Low German Mennonite youth and their transition to adulthood would shed light on the relevancy of this type of education for this cultural group. This could then inform future versions of Alberta's *Home Education Regulation.*

Closing Reflections

Through the consideration of and acting upon such recommendations, the rights of Low German Mennonite youth would be better protected, both those held presently and in-trust for the future. It was the use of a critical children's rights framework that enabled such suggestions to be contemplated, contributing to the credibility of this as a theoretical framework when researching children's issues. This lens permitted the critique of not just the educational experiences of Low German Mennonite youth, but the contextualized nature of those experiences as well. By investigating the complexities of the societal, cultural, educational, and familial contexts in which youth function, a deeper understanding of how those aspects impacted on and were impacted by the schooling experiences of

these youth could be attained. Examining those aspects through the best interests of the child principle ensured that the youth themselves remained the focal point throughout the study, helping to reveal them to the public's view as rights-bearing citizens who deserve to have a say in and about their own lived experiences.

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C138 – Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138). International Labour Organization.

C182 – Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182). International Labour Organization

Education Act (SA 2012 cE-0.3)

Employment Standards Code (RSA 2000 cE-9)

Home Education Regulation (*School Act*, Alberta Regulation 145/2006)

School Act (RSA 2000 cS-3)

Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). United Nations.

APPENDIX A: LETTER OF INITIAL CONTACT

Study Title: What does educational success look like? Low German Mennonite youths' perspectives on school and learning.

Research Investigator:
Rae Ann Van Beers
Department of Educational Policy Policy Studies
Faculty of Education
7-104 Education North
University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB, T6G 2G5
vanbeers@ualberta.ca
1(780) 232-8853
403 725-3783

Supervisor:
Dr. Lynette Shultz
Department of Educational Studies
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1(780) 492-7625

I am a graduate student at the University of Alberta pursuing my Master of Education degree. My research is focused on the question: "What are Low German Mennonite youths' perceptions of educational success?" Having taught in a program specficially designed for this cultural group for eight years, I grew concerned over the extremely high dropout rates experienced by these students. I believe that by discussing the perceptions and ideas that youth within this group hold in regards to education, we may begin to understand the factors that inhibit their success in school. Such knowledge may enable us to design programs that will better fit the unique needs of our Low German Mennonite students.

At this time I am searching for participants to interview for this research project, which will result in the completion of my thesis. I hope to interview current Mennonite students as well as youth who have been out of Alberta's formal education system for at least one year. I would like to ensure an equal representation of males and females in both of these groups. Interviews will be 30 minutes to 1 hour in length and will focus on each individual's educational experiences and beliefs about school and learning. Participants will also be required to review the interview transcripts for errors and clarification approximately two weeks after the interview date. Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study and anonymity in the reporting of results will occur. If you know of any potential participants, please discuss the study with them and pass their contact information on to me with their consent.

If you are interested in obtaining a copy of the final report of the research findings, please let me know. Thank you for your time and consideration of this project. If you have further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact myself or my supervisor, Dr. Lynette Shultz.

Respectfully,
Rae Ann Van Beers

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

APPENDIX B: CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Study title - What does educational success look like? Low German Mennonite youths' perspectives on school and learning.

I, _____, the _____ of

_____ have been asked to _____

_____.

I agree to –

1. keep the identities of potential participants and all research information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) with anyone other than the *Researcher*.

2. keep all identifying information of potential participants (e.g., names, contact information, etc.) secure while in my possession.

3. after consulting with the *Researcher*, erase or destroy all identifying information of the potential participants for this study.

_____	_____	_____
(Print Name)	(Signature)	(Date)

Researcher

_____	_____	_____
(Print Name)	(Signature)	(Date)

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LETTER AND ASSENT FORM

Study Title: What does educational success look like? Low German Mennonite youths' perspectives on school and learning.

Research Investigator:
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I am doing research in which I am trying to get a better understanding of the ideas and beliefs that Low German Mennonite youth have about success in education. A local informant has put me in contact with you and I would like to invite you to participate in this project. The results of the study will be used in the completion of my thesis for my Master of Education degree at the University of Alberta.

I am conducting this research because I believe it is important to understand the importance that Mennonite youth place on education. In my experience as a teacher in a Mennonite program, I noticed that many students left school before finishing high school. I would like to know more about why Mennonite youth leave school or do not enter at all. I would also like to know exactly what types of education that Mennonite youth feel are important for their lives. While there are no direct benefits to you for taking part in the study, your participation may help schools to design better programs that may benefit other Mennonite children.

If you agree to participate, I will interview you one time at your school or at the Mennonite Central Committee office for 30 minutes to 1 hour. The interview questions will be about your educational experiences and your beliefs about school and learning. During the interview, you can choose not to answer any questions that you feel uncomfortable discussing. You can even stop the interview if you wish. I will audio-record the interview so that I can type up your answers. If you do not want to be recorded, you can tell me and I will simply take notes. About two weeks after the interview is done, I will give you the typed transcript. This will allow you to review your responses to the questions and correct or change any parts that you wish.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can choose not to participate at any point, even after the interview has been done, up until the time that your

answers are joined with those of the other participants. If you choose to withdraw from the study, your information will be removed and destroyed.

Information from this study will be used to complete my thesis and for potential research articles and presentations. No personal information about you will be released in any of these and you will be able to create a pseudonym that will be used in any reporting. All of your information and responses will be kept confidential and only the researcher and the researcher's supervisor will see the data. Data will be kept on a password-protected laptop and/or stored in a locked cabinet for at least five years after the project is completed. If you would like to receive a copy of the final report of the research findings you can contact myself.

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact:

Rae Ann Van Beers: 1(780) 232-8853 or (403) 725-3783 or vanbeers@ualberta.ca
OR
Dr. Lynette Shultz: 1(780) 492-7625

Respectfully,

Rae Ann Van Beers, University of Alberta

I, _____ have read and understood the above and agree to participate in this study.

I agree to have the interview audio-recorded. ___ Yes ___ No

Signature: _____ Date: _____

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

APPENDIX D: PARENT INFORMATION LETTER AND CONSENT FORM

Study Title: What does educational success look like? Low German Mennonite youths' perspectives on school and learning.

Research Investigator:
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lshultz@ualberta.ca
1(780) 492-7625

I am doing research in which I am trying to get a better understanding of the ideas and beliefs that Low German Mennonite youth have about success in education. A local informant has put me in contact with you and your child and I would like to invite your child to participate in this project. The results of the study will be used in the completion of my thesis for my Master of Education degree at the University of Alberta.

I am conducting this research because I believe it is important to understand the importance that Mennonite youth place on education. In my experience as a teacher in a Mennonite program, I noticed that many students left school before finishing high school. I would like to know more about why Mennonite youth leave school or do not enter at all. I would also like to know exactly what types of education that Mennonite youth feel are important for their lives. While there are no direct benefits to you or your child for taking part in the study, your child's participation may help schools to design better programs that may benefit other Mennonite children.

If you agree to participate, I will interview your child one time at his/her school or at the Mennonite Central Committee office for 30 minutes to 1 hour. The interview questions will be about his/her educational experiences and his/her beliefs about school and learning. During the interview, your child can choose not to answer any questions he/she feels uncomfortable discussing. He/she can even stop the interview if he/she wishes. I will audio-record the interview so that I can type up your child's answers. If your child does not want to be interviewed, he/she can tell me and I will simply take notes. About two weeks after the interview is done, I will give your child the typed transcript. This will allow him/her to review his/her responses to the questions and correct or change any parts that he/she wishes.

Your child's participation in this study is voluntary. Your child can choose not to participate at any point, even after the interview has been done, up until the time that your child's answers are joined with those of the other participants. If your child chooses to withdraw from the study, his/her information will be removed and destroyed.

Information from this study will be used to complete my thesis and for potential research articles and presentations. No personal information about your child will be released in any of these and your child will be able to create a pseudonym that will be used in any reporting. All of your child's information and responses will be kept confidential and only the researcher and the researcher's supervisor will see the data. Data will be kept on a password-protected laptop and/or stored in a locked cabinet for at least five years after the project is completed. If you or your child would like to receive a copy of the final report of the research findings you can contact myself.

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact:

Rae Ann Van Beers: 1(780) 232-8853 or (403) 725-3783 or vanbeers@ualberta.ca
OR
Dr. Lynette Shultz: 1(780) 492-7625

Respectfully,

Rae Ann Van Beers, University of Alberta

I, _____ have read and understood the above and provide my consent for my child, _____, to participate in this study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

Study Title: What does educational success look like? Low German Mennonite youths' perspectives on school and learning.

Participant's Background and Educational Experiences

1) Have you ever lived in another country? If so, where and for how long?

2) How long has your family been in Canada?

3) What level of schooling have you finished? Where did you do your schooling? What was/is it like? Please consider all levels of schooling you have experienced.

4) Why have you remained in school? Who/what encouraged you to stay?

5) Was there pressure for you to leave school at any point? Where did the pressure come from? Did it cause you leave school for a period of time?

6) a) Do you currently work in addition to going to school? What is it like to do both? b) Do you think it's different for girls than boys in terms of staying in school? How is it different? Why do you think it's different?

7) How do you learn best? Do you need to see/hear/do things to understand them?

8) What do you think is important for you to learn in school? Why? What is not important? Why?

9) Have you been able to use what you learn in school in other areas of your life? If yes, can you give an example of this? If no, why do you think this is?

Participant's Beliefs and Opinions About Education

10) What does education mean to you? What do you think education means to your parents?

11) Define educational success.

12) If you were a teacher, what would you teach your students? How would you teach them?

13) What other places do you learn in? What do you learn there? Why are those things important for you to know?

14) Do you think that school affects you as a Mennonite? How?

15) a) Who should get to decide whether Mennonite students stay in school or not? Why do you think so? b) What might encourage more Mennonite youth to stay/be in school?

Education and the Future

16) What are your educational goals? Why do you have these goals? What do you think you need to do in order to meet your goals?

17) Do you think that what you learn in school will help you in your future work? If no, why not? If yes, why? Can you give a specific example?

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS

Study Title: What does educational success look like? Low German Mennonite youths' perspectives on school and learning.

Participant's Background and Educational Experiences

1) Have you ever lived in another country? If so, where and for how long?

2) How long has your family been in Canada?

3) What level of schooling have you finished? Where did you do your schooling? What was it like? Please consider all levels of schooling you have experienced.

4) When did you leave school? What caused you to leave school?

5) What are you doing now that you are no longer in school?

6) How do you learn best? Do you need to see/hear/do things to understand them?

7) What did you think was important for you to learn when you were in school? Why? What was not important? Why?

8) Have you been able to use what you learnt in school in other areas of your life? Can you give an example of this?

Participant's Beliefs and Opinions About Education

9) What does education mean to you? What do you think education means to your parents?

10) Define educational success.

11) If you were a teacher, what would you teach your students? How would you teach them?

12) What other places do you learn in? What do you learn there? Why are those things important for you to know?

13) Do you think that school affects you as a Mennonite? How?

14) Who should get to decide whether Mennonite students stay in school or not? Why do you think so?

Education and the Future

15) What are your educational goals? Why do you have these goals? What do you think you need to do in order to meet your goals?

16) Do you think that what you learnt in school will help you in your future work? If no, why not? If yes, why? Can you give an example?