The History of Russian Mennonite Systems of Education

Gary Reimer

English Composition 102
Matthew Mast
May 13, 2016

"If you think education is expensive, try ignorance," quips the famous quote in favor of educators. Most people can testify that education is expensive. Wage adjustments surface frequently at school meetings. Curriculum costs as well as other operational costs pose an endless issue among school board and administration. However, many Mennonites will notice just as quickly the healthy influence school education has on an otherwise primitive, laid-back native culture.

Consider David Padilla, a lad coming from a poor home where survival and sustenance were the first concern. He attended a Mennonite mission school, rose above poverty and became a manager of a thriving business. This student pursued the 'torch of learning' and both the teacher and the friendly school environment instilled an honest work ethic in him to advance in life.[1] Similarly, the Mennonites in Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario, raised the academic level of school from bare facts and traditional rote education to Schools of medicine, colleges and universities offering degrees for doctors, musicians, journalists, and other professionals**.**

But many Mennonite communities have not always embraced high academic values like the previous examples. At the time of the early Anabaptists, school existed primarily as an extension of the church in its spiritual role and academics were pursued only to meet the functional level needed in trade and homemaking. It seems ironic, then, that Anabaptist founders were well-educated and fresh out of universities when they separated from the Reformed church and started

[1] Author's personal witness

their own faith group. Mennonites in Russia, too, had to learn by a slow and painful process of cultural and spiritual deterioration that school was not an optional sideline, but that a good, solid education was necessary in order to preserve the faith of the forefathers.[2] The popular mindset is well captured by the Old Colony Mennonite idiom, “The more educated, the more corrupted.”[3]

As the Russian Mennonite forefathers faced, rather than ignored, these educational issues, they eventually made school an effective learning environment and training became more efficient. With their priorities for private schools and solid religious training, the Russian Mennonites maintained their own schools almost consistently for over four hundred years. Likewise the present generation should learn from the history of Russian Mennonite education to direct the philosophy, develop teaching methods, and cultivate a sensitivity to a modern culture in a modern society.

Menno Simons (1496-1561) renounced his Catholic faith in 1536 after he studied the Scriptures. He discovered that the Bible taught baptism upon repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, not infant baptism, the doctrine he grew up with. Though Simons was not the founder of Anabaptism (the faith of the re-baptizers), he involved himself and identified with most of the theology of the Anabaptist reformer-founders:

---

[2]Peter George Klassen, "A History of Mennonite Education in Manitoba" (PhD diss., University of Manitoba, 1958 10.

[3]A common idiom among Old Colony Mennonites in Belize: "Je gelehrter, je verkehrter."

Conrad Grebel (the first believer to be re-baptized), Felix Manz (the first Anabaptist martyr drowned for his faith in the Limmat River of Zurich), and Georg Blaurock (who baptized Grebel). These three had separated from Ulrich Zwingli's movement because of his teaching of infant baptism. Menno applied his own teachings faithfully and rigorously, summed up by Peter Klassen as "preaching, organizing new churches, and writing in defense of his position."[4] He taught peaceful nonresistance, complete separation of Church and State, and baptism upon voluntary repentance and confession of faith. His followers were soon known as the Mennonites.

Conflict with the Protestants and Catholics rose immediately, for the State Church felt threatened by the rapidly-spreading new theology of the Reformation. Anabaptists, who contributed two thirds of the population in some cities, were persecuted by all imaginable sorts of punishment and cruelty. Understandably, the school system suffered too. Paul Kienel points out, "Because of the severity of the persecution,...the Anabaptists and the Mennonites developed only a few Christian schools," but "taught the young clandestinely in their homes."[5] In most towns the persecuted Anabaptists did not have church buildings at all but met secretly in houses, caves, and woods, and in boats on the canals.

---

[4]Peter George Klassen, "A History of Mennonite Education in Manitoba" (PhD diss., University of Manitoba, 1958) 6.

[5]Paul A Kienel, *A History of Christian School Education,* Association of Christian Schools International: Colorado Springs, CO. 1998.

However, the Mennonites' philosophy of education was strong, as indicated by these selected points from Menno Simons' article, "The Nurture of Children":

- Teach and admonish them [children in Mennonite homes] to the extent of their understanding.
- Do not spare the rod if necessity require it.
- Direct them to reading and writing.
- Teach them to spin and do other useful and suitable handicrafts, proper to their years and persons, that you may see much honor and joy in your children.
- [Teach kingdom values.] The world desires for its children that which is earthly and perishable, money, honor, fame, and wealth.

Menno Simons concludes his article by arguing that if we do not watch over our children strictly, we might as well shut our mouths, and refrain teaching "those not of our household."[6] Menno's article is also commendable as it seeks to address the need for skills training, authoritative discipline, and age-appropriate learning, yet not in a secular way.

As persecution in the Netherlands got more unbearable many Mennonites moved to the lowlands of the Danzig area in West Prussia in 1547. In a matter of decades they became wealthy landowners and outstanding farmers.

---

[6]Menno Simons, "*The Nurture of Children", c.1557 The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, 947-951, Mennonite Publishing House: Scottdale, PA, 1984.*

Here the Mennonites developed the need to maintain German as their church language.

Even in West Prussia the Mennonites did not find permanent residence. Eventually, because of government restrictions they were not able to acquire more land than they already owned, and military recruitment threatened their faith. These pressures prompted another move. Unfortunately, according to John J. Friesen, "the most important motivation for migration was the lack of land,"[7] and not so much the military exemption. So "the 1789 Mennonite migration that should not have happened" did happen.[8] In the first two migrations 346 families migrated to two colonies, Chortitza on the Dnieper River and Molotschna on the Milk River (Molotschna). In the third and greater migration, 342 families moved to the villages near Molotschna in 1803-1806. Johann Cornies, a future hero among Mennonites, was one of these immigrants.

Promptly the Mennonites made colonies like they had in Prussia, very similar to Mennonite colonies of today. And because "acculturation into the host society was not attractive, the Mennonite population increased rapidly."[9] Klassen adds that schools were relatively "primitive," yet "better than those of the Russians, and they probably compared favorably with those of many of the enlightened

---

[7]John J. Friesen, "The 1789 Mennonite Migration that should not have Happened," *Preservings,* no. 35 (2015): 60-64.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Ibid.

countries of Europe."[10] Schools were divided into four main groupings of students: the first group were the 'readers', the second 'Catechumens,' the third 'Testamenters', and the fourth, if they persisted at learning were the 'Bible scholars.' Education was not yet compulsory and could hardly have been very exciting as most was taught by rote and endless repetition. How could this school system work when teachers came to the class with "little or no preparation for their work"?[11]

Meanwhile, a prominent figure was rising to the scene. Johann Cornies was born in June 20, 1789 and lived in Danzig in West Prussia. He received "an education appropriate according to their [his parents'] estate" and he "was talented and studious."[12] Klassen informs us that Cornies' formal education was likely minimal but evidently he succeeded at learning by reading extensively. Cornies' family settled in Molotschna. This was just the right place for him to develop advanced husbandry, land and agricultural reform, and in focus here, a distinct educational reform.[13]

To identify with the reasoning and motivations of the Mennonites, the Mennonite colony system and theology must be understood. Because they were pragmatic and caring about organization, simplicity and success, it is not surprising to hear

---

[10]Klassen, *Mennonite Education in Manitoba,* 9.

[11] Klassen, *Mennonite Education in Manitoba,* 9.

[12]"Agronomist Gavel's Biography of Johann Cornies (1789-1848)" in *Journal of Mennonite Studies Vol. 2, 1984,* Translated and Edited by Harvey L. Dyck, University of Toronto:

[13]For further reading: Ibid.

Klassen say, "In cleanliness, order, culture and prosperity their [Mennonite] villages far surpassed the Russian villages."[14] Ornate farmhouses, prim gardens, manicured hedges, and appealing boulevards typified the colony. The Mennonites were very structured, administrating their own tax system, which funded roads, schools, and churches. Building on the Anabaptist theology of the seventeenth century, Mennonites strongly believed in nonresistance, baptism upon conversion, and separation from the secular world.

Mennonites generally preferred to live in tight, isolated communities with little assimilation into the surrounding culture. Eventually it was this isolation that led to the decline of the school system in Russia. According to Dr. Francis, quoted by Klassen, "school and education do not thrive in a vacuum but require the intellectual stimulus which only inter-action with a large area of high civilization can provide."[15] Prussia was that "high civilization" for them but by fleeing persecution, the Mennonites also cut ties behind them. Though the Mennonites held to their four "R's" – reading, writing, arithmetic, and religion[16] – they made little progress, primarily because of the lack of qualified teachers. As Horst Gerlach writes, "The teacher could be a neighbor, a needy hired hand, or any pilgrim that so happened to come running from across the field," as long as he could read fluently, do any sort of

---

[14]Klassen, *Mennonite Education in Manitoba,* 8

[15]E.K.Francis, *The Mennonite School Problem in Manitoba, 1874-1919,* 210, quoted in Klassen, *A History of Mennonite Education,* 45.

[16]Klassen, *Mennonite Education in Manitoba,* 10.

mathematics, and preferably write legibly.[17] "Propagation of their faith... and perpetuat[ion of] the German language" were their two main goals, for which they are duly praised, but sadly "the main incentive to learning" was the rod.[18]

Quite logically, this resulted in an educational environment well described in this excerpt from Johann Cornies' 1846 article “In School X”:

> In a room of a miserable looking house...sits the teacher dressed in a linen gown; he wears a cap on his head, and the ever-present pipe is in his mouth. On the walls of the dark room hang saws, planes, shoemaker's knee-straps, and other household tools…. Around a table a group of pupils are seated in no recognizable order….A little baby is crying in a cradle which one of the school girls has been asked to rock. A hen with her chicks and some pigeons are roaming about among the feet of the children.[19]

This article was distributed in Mennonite circles and soon raised an awareness to the dire needs of the school system.

On a more positive note, the Mennonite teachers emphasized Scripture memorization, much like the early Anabaptists did when "even the less learned among them knew the Scriptures more thoroughly than the scholarly

---

[17]Gerlach, *Russland Mennoniten,* 32, author's translation.

[18]Klassen, *Mennonite Education in Manitoba,* 9-10.

[19]M.S. Harder, “A Pioneer Educator – Johann Cornies” by *Mennonite Life,* October 1948, 6-7, quoted in Peter George Klassen, "A History of Mennonite Education in Manitoba" (PhD diss., University of Manitoba, 1958), 18.

doctors [of the early Reformation Era]."[20] As their main educational resource, the Mennonites used the Bible for reading, memorization, and penmanship at which the pupils excelled. Most Mennonite families also owned a copy of *The Complete Works of Menno Simons* and *Martyrs' Mirror.*

Johann Cornies responded to the desperate situation of the schools, and leading the Christian School Association, he started a teachers' training school at Orloff. He proceeded to reform schools by "erecti[ng] model schools, encouraging compulsory attendance, licensing competent teachers, developing new curriculum with uniform textbooks, and [installing] well planned courses of study." Cornies' establishment of secondary central schools is considered to be his key achievement in educational reform. The teachers training conventions that he organized became "a source of inspiration for teachers." At first a living could hardly be made from a teacher's pay but now the raise of salary itself encouraged them. Above all else Cornies maintained, "All educational procedures must be religious in their emphasis."[21]

Years later while reflecting on the effects of the school reformation in Russia and its influential leader, Johann Cornies, Klassen claimed, "The educational ideas he expressed are as progressive and revolutionary as those of John Dewey (a 20th century educational philosopher and psychologist who promoted “progressive education”) and showed him to be far

---

[20]Kienel, *History of Christian School Education,*
[21]Ibid. 15

beyond his time."[22]

And the time was the early 1870's. The Mennonites sensed war. Military exemption was lifted and military service was made compulsory. Their major conviction of maintaining the German church language was threatened, for the government wanted to enforce instruction in the Russian language. This would consequently prevent instruction in Mennonite faith. Much as the huge, thriving estates in Russia were dear to them, four different Mennonite groups decided on mass migration. Twelve delegates investigated the Manitoba prairies and a few other locations in America. Only the Bergthal (from the Old Colony Mennonites), Fuerstenland, and Kleine Gemeinde Mennonite groups decided to move to Manitoba while the rest were satisfied with the American locations. By the time the delegates returned to Russia, the Mennonites were prepared to emigrate. In 1874 18,000 people sailed to America, bound for Kansas and Manitoba. They were faced many challenges of pioneering, settling the prairies, and restarting a social structure. They left the neat, tidy villages behind to face the unknown, the unpredictable, the challenging new frontier.

Originally these new communities flourished and stabilized. As an overview Klassen defines three stages of Russian Mennonite education in Manitoba. During the first ten years they were totally free to run their own schools and they

[22]Unger, Harlow. “Progressive education” in Encyclopedia of American Education, 770.

taught “fundamentals in religion and German.”[23] In Manitoba the Mennonites still wanted to propagate the same school system that they had used in Russia. The teaching content remained mostly the same as in Russia. He describes how, initially, the Mennonites delighted in the granted religious privileges – “complete exemption from military duty...and the fullest freedom to exercise religion and to educate their children,”[24] much like they were used to. Still they wanted to keep their culture and tradition alive and vital for many generations. For them this meant teaching “religion and German. [For…] what the school was, the church would some day be.”[25] Many of the teachers, fresh from Russia, were still “under the influence of Johann Cornies” and his pioneering efforts.[26] However, like Mennonites in Russia experienced before, these pioneer Mennonites did not communicate sufficiently with “higher centers of civilization.” Inevitably deterioration of the school system followed.

The second stage marked the period “when the public schools were organized.”[27] New guidelines were enacted and these complicated the school system for the Mennonites. The Manitoba Public Schools Act of 1890 stated these three requirements: “1 All public schools in the province should be nonsectarian, state-controlled, and supported by all taxpayers. 2 School attendance was not compulsory, and 3 religion could

---

[23]Klassen, *Mennonite Education in Manitoba,* 2

[24]Ibid., 19.

[25]Ibid., 24.

[26]Klassen, *Mennonite Education in Manitoba,* 45.

[27]Ibid.

be taught before or after school hours in the public school itself."[28] For many this requirement to give up their church schools for government schools was a major conflict.

In a personal interview with Arthur Penner, now in his seventies, Penner shares personal experiences of the implications that the School Act brought for the Kleine Gemeinde students. Under the first point, “the state-controlled schools planted the flag (Union Jack) on every public schoolyard. The national anthem, 'Oh Canada' was sung every morning, and at times 'God save the King' was chanted.” This undoubtedly bothered the Mennonites' consciences and personal convictions, for they wondered how they could “rear the children in the doctrine of non-resistance” in a strongly patriotic environment. As Penner continues the Mennonites used “a government curriculum that they were required to teach in school.” The state curriculum required the usage of English. Under the third point German could only be taught as a half-hour addition to the regular school hours, and that ruled out instruction in religion, for most religion was still taught in German. Now religion and language were both restricted in school but not completely forbidden.[29]

The first World War had significantly shaken up the Mennonites in Canada. Through all the turmoil, teachers were determined to maintain the school system. Mennonites' memory of the War and near military conscription plagued them. In Klassen's words, the Kleine Gemeinde “realized the

[28]Ibid., 63.

[29]Arthur D. Penner, Interview by Author, Feb. 27, 2016.

need for adequate education,"[30] and supported the movement for better education. But the Old Colony considered progressive education "as of the world and therefore sinful."[31] With these rising political pressures and religious issues the Old Colony were the first to respond with another migration. In 1922 a large group moved to the semi-arid deserts of Chihuahua, Mexico. They started their own schools upon arriving in the village, Santa Clara, and started to farm the dry soil of this sub-temperate region. This was their response to the coming of the second stage of education in Manitoba.

In the third stage of education in Manitoba, "The struggle for better education,"[32] the school experienced a period of restoration and revival. Renewed vigor and vision came from the teachers who had emigrated Russia after World War 1 in the early 1920's. They "left [Russia] not so much because of church issues but because of atheist propaganda of the Bolsheviks."[33]

The Russians brought with them new vitality and high goals for education in Manitoba. They promoted higher learning. They compromised with the public school system, "dropped former prejudices," implemented new subjects in their curriculum like English grammar and geography, and began using modern teaching methods. The government compromised by allowing the Mennonites to place their own

---

[30]Klassen, *Mennonite Education in Manitoba,* 56.

[31]Ibid.

[32]Ibid.*,* 2.

[33]Gerlach, *Russland Mennoniten,* 186.

certified teachers (the Russians) in their schools, thus creating 'privatized' public schools (a.k.a. district schools[34]). All the regular subjects were taught according to curriculum prescriptions. Since music as a subject was not required by the government, singing was promoted by the church but taught only according to the interest of the teachers. But the Mennonites absolutely prohibited singing in four-part harmony since this "would soon lead [them] away from simplicity and humbleness."[35]

For the first time in Russian Mennonite history learning really became fun and involving. Penner remembers doing a social studies project with his grade. The project was presented as a motion picture box and it displayed how the people in various cultures were clothed. In another project, an African village scene was created in a flat box. The students made grasslands and deserts using sand, grass, sticks, and soil. To finish the scene, small paper houses were placed in the little village.

But not all was as peaceful as the school scene portrayed. A schism divided the Holdemann (Church of God in Christ, Mennonite) from the Kleine Gemeinde. The Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online (gameo.org) describes the Holdemanns as "probably the more progressive element that left." The Kleine Gemeinde that remained became "discouraged [and]… withdrew into a stricter

[34]Klassen, *Mennonite Education in Manitoba,* 46.
[35]Ibid., 28.

conservatism and isolation from all other religious groups."[36]

Just three years after the destructive World War 2 "the idea of emigration was renewed" among the Kleine Gemeinde again.[37] Because of their constant concern for military exemption and school privileges, combined with dissatisfaction of progressive church leadership, about six hundred persons or fifteen percent of the Kleine Gemeinde present in Manitoba migrated to Mexico. The Mennonite procession traveled across the US by train and freight trucks. Upon arriving in Chihuahua State the Mennonites were hosted in native Mexican 'haciendas' or ranch compounds in Los Jagueyes until they had distributed land, erected houses, and relocated their possessions to their new adobe brick homes.

Why had they chosen Mexico? Possibly the previous Old Colony migration to Mexico, in pursuit of educational freedom, was their example. Maybe the vast, open farmland may have drawn them even though it was semi-arid desert with nothing else to be seen but grassy savannas between two mesquite-covered mountain ranges. In this country crop yields could be low in times of drought, leaving people hungry and cattle starving. But these Russian Mennonites were willing to sacrifice a lot of comfort. What mattered to them was religious freedom, military exemption, freedom of education, and a large tract of land on which to build an organized colony. These privileges had been personally granted by the President

---

[36]Harold S Bender, Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online, "http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Kleine_Gemeinde," 1956.

[37]Ibid.

Alvaro Obregon upon request by the Mennonite delegates. Immediately the Mennonites decided on maximizing these privileges. They set up normal church schools. “Colony life [remained] under the control of the church,” like many of their communities in Canada had been. In reaction to the public school movement in Canada which had involved instruction in English, they reverted to solely German instruction in school.[38]

Freed from educational restrictions, the Mennonites in Mexico did not always use the privileges to the best effect. Arthur Penner shares a personal encounter with the prevalent mindset in those early years, “Parents said they needed schools, but they would have them their way.”[39] The move toward conservatism meant that only male teachers were allowed to teach. According to Cornelius Dyck, the teacher often was “selected at random and [had] little special training.” The sudden, well-intended decision to teach only the German language meant that their curriculum would consist of very basic materials: “a simple [German] reader, the Bible, catechism, and hymnary.” Furthermore, the teaching methods still were rote, emphasizing memorization “rather than… independent thought.”[40]

This interpretation of freedom brought some long-lasting and harsh consequences. Children born in Mexico and instructed in German became handicapped and trapped as the

---

[38]Cornelius J. Dyck, editor, *An Introduction to Mennonite History,* Herald Press: Scottdale, Pennsylvania, 1967, 316

[39]Personal interview with Arthur Penner, February 27, 2016.

[40]Cornelius J. Dyck, *Introduction to Mennonite History,* 316.

world culture became anglicized. Overall the view of education dropped significantly. As Penner testifies, students received a very basic education. Subjects that give students a key for future careers like science, history, and language arts were lost in the transition from English to German. Many students attended school only until seventh grade with some dropping out as early as sixth grade. Added to the complication was the pioneer stage of colonization in Mexico. Penner recounts that school children came from different village backgrounds in Canada and had to merge into one school. This severely complicated classroom management.

As Penner adds, children brought negative impressions of school from their parents at home. They were not driven by the goal for unity and a quiet, studious classroom where lots of positive learning should take place.[41] In chaotic classroom settings, studious children were deprived of great opportunities in life which they later regretted. Peter Reimer relates the ridicules that his father Ben Reimer experienced in school. “Dad was a gifted singer and wanted to sing in school. However, if he wanted to sing he had to sing with the girls, for the boys thought singing was a girl's thing. This made him ashamed many times.”[42] But Ben Reimer did not let this handicap him. Twenty years later, (after another Mennonite migration, this time to the hot and humid tropics), he was the primary promoter and backbone of a new movement among Mennonites in Belize, called the evening singing classes.

---

[41]Personal interview with Arthur Penner.

[42]Personal conversation with Peter Reimer, 7 May, 2016.

Some convictions and goals among Mennonites needed to be transformed. As David M. Quiring writes in the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, "The Kleine Gemeinde Church did not go to Mexico with the intention of interfering with the Old Colonists."[43] They considered themselves the 'quiet in the country' and as such did not want to intrude other native groups or impose their faith on them. But the Mennonites became sensitive to the environment and responded to the silent call of the needy around them. Describing this shift in the Kleine Gemeinde, Quiring continues, "[they] accepted excommunicated Old Colonists… [and] implemented an active evangelization program among the Old Colony groups. [The Old Colonists also] accepted the educational, social, and church alternatives offered to them."[44]

The voice of the older generation was gradually replaced by the younger generation which remembered the thriving English schools in Manitoba. A vision for an improved curriculum grew. With the development of a printing house in Mexico, Centro Escolar Evangelico, the development of German curriculum was also more feasible. Once again the Mennonites enjoyed a stable, peaceful time of prosperity. They cherished religious freedoms, interacted peaceably with the natives, and evangelized by spreading the Gospel among native Indian tribes and planting churches among the Old Colonists

---

[43]David M. Quiring, "Intervention and Resistance: Two Mennonite Visions Conflict in Mexico," University of Saskatchewan, *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 2004, 87.

[44]Ibid.

Summary of Factors that Shaped Education for Russian Mennonites

Most migrations covered in this study greatly impacted the course of Russian Mennonite history. Unfortunately, the move from Prussia to Russia was based mostly on the desire for more land and military exemption. The Mennonites also learned that if they wanted to preserve their religious heritage they would need to preserve the German language which they picked up in their sojourn in Prussia. In Russia the school system was above the native standards from the start, because of their Bible-centered Christian emphasis and their community system of united effort. However their school system started to deteriorate because of poorly qualified teachers, primitive materials, and dysfunctional classrooms. Under the direction of the visionary Johann Cornies an improved and spectacular school system was developed.

In Russia during the mid-1870s, military exemptions were removed and the German language was being replaced by Russian. This time the Mennonites' decision to move, primarily because of religious freedom, is commendable. Their emphasis to maintain the traditional German language was driven in part by the skewed idea that the language was almost their religion. The Mennonites could have responded sensitively and used Russian as a tool to reach the needy, native population. Though their concern was that their youth would acculturate and imbibe the Russian ideologies, they could have used Russian in missionary outreaches.

In Canada the introduction of English into the school

curriculum initially caused much apprehension and some conflict among the Mennonites. But with the arrival of more Russian Mennonites in the early 1920s they used the English language as a tool to access knowledge. They were sensitive to the modern culture and responded wisely. Unlike the Old Colony, the Kleine Gemeinde did not want to stay behind nor become handicapped and obsolete. So many Kleine Gemeinde churches today have either bilingual or even trilingual education in their schools.

The German tradition remains to this day in many Old Colony as well as many Kleine Gemeinde schools. The primary reason to maintain German was clearly outlined in a petition to the Manitoba Legislature in 1916. As Klassen records, the Mennonites wanted to preserve German "Not out of national interests" but "because German is our mother tongue, and all our religious and devotional books and other valuable documents are published in the German language. These would be useless to our children in the course of time, if they were taught only in English."[45] In an English speaking society it is important for Russian Mennonites to evaluate the purpose of their language, both to preserve the heritage and to communicate with a broader range of nationalities. Many Mennonite homes are anglicizing today. Particularly for these reasons the German tradition should be a major concern among Russian Mennonite circles.

The compliance of the Kleine Gemeinde to the Public

[45]A petition to the Manitoba Legislature on Jan. 7, 1916 quoted by Klassen, *A History of Mennonite Education.*

Schools Act is rather controversial. They were positively exposed to a much more standardized system than they had known so far. But as was anticipated the younger generation was also exposed to Western cultural ideas and national values like secularism, patriotism, and progressivism. These in turn became doctors, journalists, engineers, and professionals in various other fields. But they also left most Mennonite values and traded the Mennonite faith for an evangelical faith.

In response to undesirable modernization some Old Colony and Kleine Gemeinde moved to Mexico to live a more conservative lifestyle again. This migration was well-intended, but it brought many unintended consequences. The school age generation struggled with the switch from English to all-German instruction. Many children were deprived major potential careers. They faced severe difficulties of pioneering. The value of education depreciated significantly. They were once again the quiet of the land.

In this historical overview a few selected persons shine particularly because many of their decisions and works still speak. Menno Simons decided to leave the Catholic state church and return to a more biblical, Christ-centered faith. He preached, planted churches, and wrote many powerful articles. These articles, collected in *The Complete Works of Menno Simons*, were read by Mennonites in Prussia, Russia, Canada, and other countries where they have settled.

As mentioned earlier, Johann Cornies was appalled by the poor school conditions in Russia. He learned that if the Mennonite culture and faith were to be preserved, the school

system needed to be improved. So in his busy lifetime Cornies organized Central Schools, a teacher training institute, and a school association; encouraged development of new curriculum with uniform textbooks; and built model schools to offer a more pleasant classroom and a positive learning environment. Because of Cornies' pioneering effort both in education and in agriculture, the Russian Mennonites rose to wealth, status, and stability. Russian Mennonites in Canada would build the foundations of their school systems on his models.

Though usually the 'quiet of the land', the Kleine Gemeinde also reached out with their agricultural developments, missions, and curriculum development. This can be seen especially in Johann Cornies' example of starting agricultural reformation in Russia. His model transformed the steppes of southern Russia to a breadbasket and benefited the government greatly. The authorities were shocked to hear that the Mennonites decided on mass migration. In Manitoba, the Mennonite presence soon dominated the population and transformed the prairies into boom towns. In Mexico, the rather uneducated yet pragmatic Mennonites experimented with agriculture in semi-arid desert. In recent years they have transformed the wilderness to vast, lush farmland and thriving business centers. They offer trilingual education in certain schools. They support missionary projects in forms of mission schools, various aids, and funds among Old Colonists and in outreach to native Indian tribes.

Centro Escolar Evangelico, a printing house in Los

Jagueyes, Chihuahua, provides the Russian Mennonite world with German curriculum beyond grade eight. Most German books in circulation among Russian Mennonites are translated from English and published here. Their printing facilities are fully equipped with modern technology. Yet the Mennonites present in that community still practice reasonable conservatism. There is much sensitive response to modern culture, but these Mennonites are also passionate about reflecting Christ's light in a dark world.

Mennonites do not need to conform to the post-modern world in culture, philosophy, and lifestyles, but they should be proactive and responsive to change. But they do well to be informed. Therefore teachers, in particular, but parents also, should always seek to learn more by reading works of professional teachers, attending teacher training institutes, and exchanging ideas with other teachers. Facts must be taught and reasoning skills must be developed passionately so that students will successfully pass on the heritage in the future. History must be studied for examples of educational developments and wisdom must be applied to avoid mistakes that others made before them. Teachers should not only teach strong biblical values to their students, but they should also exemplify those values in their daily Christian walk. This is the only way they will truly succeed at teaching and training children.

Bibliography

Bender, Harold S. "Kleine Gemeinde." 1956. Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online. http://gameo.org/Kleine Gemeinde.

Brubaker, Steven. "Mennonite Education: The Distinctive Emphases." 2004.

Dyck, Cornelius J. *Introduction to Mennonite History.* 3'rd ed. PA: Herald Press. 1967.

Dyck, Harvey L. ed. "Agronomist Gravel's Biography of Johann Cornies." Translated by Harvey L. Dyck. *Journal of Mennonite Studies,* no. 2, **(1984).**

Francis, E.K. *The Mennonite School Problem in Manitoba: 1874 to 1919.* 210. Quoted in Peter George Klassen, "A History of Mennonite Education in Manitoba" (PhD diss., University of Manitoba, 1958), 45.

Friesen, John J. "The 1789 Mennonite Migration that should not have Happened," *Preservings,* no. 35 (2015): 60-64.

Friesen, John W. "Studies in Mennonite Education: The State of the Art." *Journal of Mennonite Studies* no. 1, (1983). 133-148.

Gerlach, Horst. *Russland Mennoniten 1.* 5th Ed. Pfalz: Kircheimbolanden. 2008.

Harder, M.S. "A Pioneer Educator – Johann Cornies."

Mennonite Life, (1948) 6-7. Quoted in Peter George Klassen, "A History of Mennonite Education in Manitoba" (PhD diss., University of Manitoba, 1958), 13.

Kienel, Paul A. LL.D. *History of Christian School Education, A.* Colorado Springs: Association of Christian Schools International. 1998.

Klassen, Peter George. "A History of Mennonite Education in Manitoba." PhD diss., University of Manitoba, 1958.

Lemov, Doug. *Teach Like a Champion.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 2010.

Mennonite Encyclopedia, The. s.v. "Johann Cornies; Education Among the Russian Mennonites; Mennonite Education."

Plett, Eddy K. "The School at Quellen Colony, Chihuahua." *Preservings,* no. 35. (2015): 40-51.

Quiring, David M. "Intervention and Resistance: Two Mennonite Visions Conflict in Mexico." *Journal of Mennonite Studies,* (2004). University of Saskatchewan.

Simons, Menno. "The Nurture of Children"*The Complete Works of Menno Simons.* Scottdale: Mennonite Publishing House, 1984.

Unger, Harlow. *Encyclopedia of American Education.* s.v. "Progressive education."