

Social Class, Amish Culture, and an Egalitarian Ethos: Case Study from a Rural School Serving Amish Children

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This article presents a case study of egalitarian educational practices evident in a rural school that served a large proportion (40%) of Amish students. The Amish are a pacifist Christian sect widely misunderstood as quaint and even backward; their traditional work is small-scale farming. In 1972 the Amish wrested the national right—via a US Supreme Court case—to educate their children only through 8th grade, and in their own schools. Given this struggle, the fact that some Amish families would elect to send their children to public schools (which their taxes support) might be regarded as surprising. The school—one of six in a larger study—described in this article took careful measures, however, to welcome Amish children and families, even to the extent of establishing a unique seventh and eighth grade curriculum for them (and thus returning seventh and eighth grade instruction to an elementary school setting). The focus of this study was to characterize (primarily via the analysis of interview transcripts) the school's educational practice. Four themes emerged from the analysis of transcripts: (1) "in league with parents," (2) "teaching agrarian values," (3) "educating for community participation," and (4) "embracing all children." These themes were, in fact, the obverse of those that characterized the other five schools represented in the overall data set, making it by far the most egalitarian school studied.

Introduction

Empirical research about how rural schooling communicates cultural values is quite limited, and the current study adds to this small body of work. Drawing on data from a case study of a rural public school located in an Amish community, it offers a description of the way egalitarian values are communicated and enacted. Two theoretical perspectives on egalitarianism, one primarily cultural in focus and the other primarily structural, provide possible ways to interpret the descriptive findings. Whereas structural explanations attribute a group's relative egalitarianism to its economic circumstances, cultural explanations attribute it to shared beliefs, values, and practices. These perspectives are presented in the literature

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review. Then, as we explain in the discussion section, our interpretation draws on the culturalist perspective, which turns out to be the more relevant of the two. Studies that describe and interpret cultural values and practices among groups such as the Amish reveal alternatives to values and practices that pervade the United States' culture more broadly (e.g., Peskhin, 1991). Such alternatives become important when widely held national values and practices seem questionable for the short- or long-term health of the population, the planet, or both (e.g., Bredemeier & Toby, 1960; Kunstler, 2005; Norgaard, 1995; Rudmin & Kilbourne, 1996). Agrarian values, for example, are seen by some as generative of progressivism and democratic engagement, in distinct contrast to the more pervasive mainstream values of individualism, consumerism, or corporatism (e.g., Mariola, 2005; Singer & de Sousa, 1983; Theobald, 1997).

The comparison of different value positions is critical for educators because the cultural work of education concerns the preservation of what is valuable and the transformation of what is not. Definitions of value are themselves cultural products. As a consequence, educators always need to decide where they stand with respect to the skills and knowledge worthy of being transmitted. Furthermore, as literature on the hidden curriculum suggests, practices associated with the transmission of academic skills and knowledge, such as

the assignment of students to different curricula and their treatment by educators and peers, also convey messages about the social order and different students' places within it (e.g., Jay, 2003; Rosenbaum, 1976).

Rural America, moreover, because of its diversity as well as its connection to certain long-standing economic and political traditions, provides a source of some potentially useful alternatives to mainstream culture (e.g., Berry, 1977; Goodsell, 2000; Reid, 1980-81). Nevertheless, in rural communities, as elsewhere, educators need to evaluate and, to the extent possible, decide what is worthy—both in terms of academic content and in terms of less explicit messages about social and economic positioning. Case studies, most notably those of Cynthia Duncan (1999) but others as well (e.g., Salamon, 2003), reveal considerable variation in social structure and attitudes across rural communities. Some rural communities sustain democratic traditions and treat all members with respect; while others function as plutocracies, empowering the elite few and deploying—and propagating—classist, chauvinistic, or racist values (e.g., Gaventa, 1980).

Related Literature

As a basis for interpreting data from the case study presented here, we examine the social science literature on egalitarianism. Two bodies of literature seem germane: literature explaining egalitarianism as an effect of economic structure and literature explaining egalitarianism as a cultural phenomenon. Although our findings seem to fit better with a cultural explanation than a structural one, we nevertheless begin with a consideration of the earlier structural work. Historically in the social science literature, structural understandings of social dynamics preceded cultural ones. As a result, some social scientists argue that cultural explanations are built in part on structuralist foundations (e.g., Turner, 2003). In addition to this rationale for including the structural literature, we also believe that research claiming to illustrate a particular social phenomenon (in this case, egalitarianism) ought to acknowledge all traditions that have a direct bearing on the phenomenon, not just those that accord with the researchers' ultimate interpretation.

Moreover, because our case study concerns a cultural group about which readers may know little, we also provide a brief review of literature about Amish culture. Our aim is to offer sufficient background about Amish communities in the United States to show that their values and practices—including their schooling practices—do indeed differ substantially from those of the mainstream.

Egalitarianism as an Effect of Economic Structure

Structural explanations of egalitarianism accord with Marx's (1867) claim that the economic structure of a group has a determining influence on its superstructure of laws,

political activity, and education as well as on its prevailing ideology. One notable application of this principle, though not strictly Marxian, concerns the structure of local economic activity and its effect on community engagement—with widespread engagement and improved quality of life taken as emblematic of more egalitarian practice. Much of this work, in fact, has centered on rural communities. The classic study is Goldschmidt's (1947) analysis of farming practices in California. Goldschmidt found that the presence of corporate agriculture, with its tendency to introduce marked social stratification, negatively influenced a range of quality-of-life indicators in communities. In communities in which small-scale farming and a more egalitarian social structure predominated, quality-of-life indicators were far more positive. Even though corporate agriculture has become the norm in the United States, recent studies continue to affirm Goldschmidt's findings (Lobao, 1990; Mills & Ulmer, 1970; Welsh & Lyson, 2005).

A small body of sociological literature has also explored the influence of economic inequality on community dynamics with a bearing on egalitarianism. Gaventa (1980), for example, examined the economic dynamics leading to the disenfranchisement and resulting apathy of the poor in a rural coal mining community. In *Worlds Apart*, Cynthia Duncan (1999) presented case studies leading her to conclude that democracy and sustainability were promoted in rural communities in which there was a relatively large middle class. Her case studies painted a sharp contrast between communities in which elites dominated local institutions and communities in which a sizeable middle class promoted wider participation. Duncan's middle class, however, represented a self-employed, independent, hard-working, and innovative group of locals. It differed considerably from the "new" middle-class cultivated to advance the interests of mine owners in Gaventa's Appalachian valley.

Other rural sociologists have also provided evidence supporting what might be called "middle-class theory" (e.g., Chan & Elder, 2001). With this theory, economic structure is represented by the construct, *socioeconomic status*, which American researchers pioneered to supersede the less popular Marxian concept of qualitatively different classes (Wright, 2005). Perhaps because of these origins, middle-class theory, at least in its applications to schooling, tends more to concern itself with middle-class mores than with the distribution of resources. The principle here is simple, and it is compatible with Ruby Payne's (1998) popular "poverty training" workshops: The greater the devotion to middle-class ways of being, the more healthy the community and its school. Payne argues that schools must teach impoverished children to behave, almost instinctively or at least automatically, according to middle-class mores.

The difficulty with both this line of analysis and the practical work advocated by Payne is manifold: (1) it does not

disclose *which* middle class promotes overall betterment—the petty bourgeoisie of small-scale self-employment or the “new” middle class of corporate managers and organizational functionaries (cf. Flora, Flora, Spears, & Swanson, 1992); (2) it tends to blame poverty on the poor themselves (Gorski, 2006); and (3) because of its origins in American functionalism, it limits the analyst’s access to the important concept of class struggle between groups (“classes”) whose economic interests are qualitatively different.

Egalitarianism as a Cultural Phenomenon

Some sociological theorizing and research suggests that cultures differ across ideological dimensions, with each particular ideological perspective informing the collective identity, idiosyncratic logic, and collective memory of that culture (Dimaggio, 1997). Within cultures, beliefs and practices also define social roles and the hierarchical position of those roles—conditions that enable members to form personal identities within certain constrained boundaries. For some cultures long-standing beliefs about gender shape the range of possible identities open to males and females, prescribe and limit their practices, and set rules for their status attainment. In such cultures gender represents a more salient category of difference than other characteristics, and therefore the degree of equality accorded to males and females arguably becomes a more or less important matter. For other cultures characteristics such as wealth, family name, or religion represent more important categories of difference, and the cultural outlook on social distance—that is, the extent to which different categories of people are viewed as inherently unequal—tends to be more salient for one or another of these categories.

Thinking about culture in this way discloses its complexity, and some researchers have sought to find schemes for classifying the related cultural variation. Geert Hofstede, for instance, has carried out some of the most thorough investigations of cultural differences in industrialized countries. On the basis of empirical work, most of which was conducted with employees from one transnational corporation, Hofstede (2001) derived five dimensions along which national cultures seemed to vary. These dimensions represent ideological continua from (1) individualism to collectivism, (2) class or status-based elitism to egalitarianism, (3) risk-taking to risk-avoidance, (4) male dominance to gender equity, and (5) past-orientation to future-orientation. Egalitarianism seems to come into play in two ways in Hofstede’s scheme: first in relation to class or status, and second in relation to gender. With respect to the case study reported here, we are particularly concerned with cultural values that predispose community members to disregard social class as a salient marker.

Other culturalist interpretations than Hofstede’s also exist and may be better suited than classificatory schemes for explaining dynamics such as cultural fusion, conflict

across and within cultures, and within-culture contradictions and ambiguities—dynamics that may characterize relations between Amish and mainstream US (which the Amish term “English”) culture. Analysis of subcultures and their relationship to dominant cultures has indeed been supported by the work of post-structural theorists in the “cultural studies” camp, many of whom pay particular attention to dynamics of exploitation, cooptation, resistance, and identity formation (see e.g., Hall, 1996; Hebdige, 1979; Hoggart, 1957; Williams, 1973). These theorists often analyze the ways that popular media represent, misrepresent, and contribute to the identities of subcultures and their members.

Their contribution to an understanding of egalitarianism is significant but roundabout, focusing far more on the social conditions that produce domination of some groups by other groups than on the conditions that promote equality. Indeed, the literature coming from Cultural Studies has usually exhibited either an urban working-class focus (e.g., Hebdige, 1979) or a nationally generic “popular culture” focus (e.g., Giroux & Simon, 1988). With one exception, we are unaware of any major theorists in Cultural Studies who address cultural issues relating to rural schools or communities.

The exception is one of the founders of Cultural Studies, the Welsh literary and social critic, Raymond Williams. His upbringing gave him an appreciation of the cultural dilemmas of rural life that he—remarkably—preserved in his scholarly project. His literary study, *The Country and the City* (1973) deals with the peculiar treatment accorded rural life in English literature. In this classic and largely unread work, Williams argues that the mainstream project of British literature was to construct rural life as an *idyll*—a tale of bucolic bliss. One of the accomplishments of this classic is to falsify the idyll. Although idyllic conditions never prevailed, the idyll helped to create what Williams terms a “structure of feeling” around our ideas about rural life. In other words, when we imagine rural life, we feel a sense of *loss*.

This sensibility, according to Williams, is dismissive of contemporary rural purposes: not only are they of lesser relevance than contemporary urban ones, they are less relevant than the purposes of the idyllic past. Curiously, then, one of the originators of Cultural Studies has explained why the later-evolving field has paid so little attention to rural cultures. As always, whose stories are told, and why, relates to who benefits from cultural constructions, and this nexus of cultural activity and experience has everyday effect in real schools and classrooms.

Williams, as well, viewed the extension of this style of cultural domination, that is, domination of the cosmopolitan core over the cultures of the periphery, as a feature of modernism. He could have imagined globalization (he died

in 1988) as an extension of such cultural depredations across the globe, and it would have disgusted him. He advised something quite different, and certainly more egalitarian:

If we are to break out of the non-historical fixity of *post*-modernism, then we must search out and counterpose an alternative tradition taken from the neglected works left in the wide margin of the century, a tradition which may address itself not to this by now exploitable because quite inhuman rewriting of the past but, for all our sakes, to a modern *future* in which community may be imagined again. (p. 35, original emphasis)

One might claim that modernist, anti-rural culture represents, for Williams, the apex of elitism, obliterating both actual community and the ability to imagine or articulate common purpose in local places—and not only rural places, though these were especially significant for him.

Different though they may be, both culturalist approaches to community contribute to a richer understanding of dynamics contributing to or countering egalitarian views and practices. Hofstede, working in a distinctly modernist, value-neutral mode, suggests ways to gauge the constitution of cultures (albeit, rather abstract national ones). Hypothetically, communities as well as nations might vary with respect to the dimensions Hofstede suggests. Williams's distinctly literary approach discloses the power differentials that divide rural, as peripheral and dismissible, from urban, as core and cosmopolitan. It also points to a value on which Hofstede remains, as he does with all values, predictably neutral: community, and particularly community as a script that runs contrary to the usual purposes of schooling, and most particularly of state schooling in rural places. Williams (1983, p. 118), as author of the quip “equal opportunity is equal opportunity to become unequal” would hardly tolerate a “modern future” in which community itself stood for elitist domination.

Amish Culture and Schooling Practices

Perhaps quintessentially “middle-class” in the original sense described above (i.e., self-employed, independent, hard-working, innovative), the Amish represent a distinct and growing subculture in the United States (Donnermeyer & Cooksey, 2004). Tracing their origins to the Swiss Anabaptist movement of the 16th century, the Amish initially immigrated to North America in the first part of the 18th century. Although their overall population has remained relatively small, their population grew significantly in the 20th century, going from around 5,000 in 1900 to nearly 200,000 by the year 2000. Initially settling in the eastern United States, the Amish have now established communities in more than 20 states, from Delaware to Colorado (Dewalt, 2006).

During much of Amish history, the primary occupation has been farming, and a focus on an agrarian way of life fits with the religious tenets and cultural practices of this group of people (Hostetler, 1993). The Amish faith, which is one variant of Christianity, is taught to children from an early age, and strict adherence is required of adult community members. In fact, adherence to church doctrine is so important that the Amish exercise *Meidung* (or “shunning”) when adult community members fail to honor their commitment to living in the Amish way (Kraybill, 2001).

Also deeply connected to their religious practice, the tradition of *rumspringa*—literally, to “run around”—provides a period of freedom to Amish adolescents once they have reached the age of 16 (Shachtman, 2006). The ultimate purpose of this period of freedom is to enable young men and women to come to a free decision about becoming members of the Amish church (Hostetler, 1993; Shachtman, 2006). The Amish believe that free choice requires adolescents to investigate the alternatives available to them in non-Amish (or “English”) society before making the commitment to abide by Amish beliefs and practices for the rest of their lives (Stevick, 2007).

Amish views about technology also relate to concerns about religious and family life—namely to avoid technologies that might have detrimental effects on the Amish community (Hostetler, 1989; Stevick, 2007). In some cases the elders of Amish congregations decide that, even though ownership, for example, of cars and telephones, seems to be detrimental, occasional use under particular circumstances might be allowable (Kraybill, 2001).

Despite the view that farming is a critical part of Amish life, the realities of the contemporary economy have compelled increasing numbers of Amish to engage in outside employment (Kraybill & Nolt, 2004; McConnell & Hurst, 2006). Some start small businesses, making furniture, mobile homes, or building barns. Others become shopkeepers, make and sell crafts, or produce foodstuffs. Although the Amish often start their own businesses, some segment of the Amish workforce also is employed by non-Amish employers (Kraybill & Nolt, 2004). And because they are viewed as quaint by mainstream Americans, some Amish people cater to the tourist trade by marketing traditional crafts, giving tours of Amish country, or running restaurants in tourist enclaves (Kraybill, 2001).

With respect to schooling, the Amish believe in formal education up through the eighth grade. And in 1972 they won the right legally to act on this belief by withdrawing their children from public schools after the eighth grade (*Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 1972). Interestingly, the Amish originally sent their children to public (“English”) schools but began building their own parochial schools in 1925 in response to the consolidation of small and rural schools in public districts (Dewalt, 2006). By 2000, the Amish had

established 1,139 parochial schools located in 24 states (Dewalt, 2006). Despite access to parochial schools, many Amish families continue to send their children to public schools. In Ohio's Holmes County Settlement, which is the largest Amish settlement in the world with a population of 30,000, only about two-thirds of the children attend Amish parochial schools, with the remaining students attending either public schools or receiving home schooling (McConnell & Hurst, 2006).

Methods

This case study, which allowed us to examine egalitarian educational practices enacted by educators and community members, was one of six in a larger study of rural schools serving low-income students. The schools had received honorary status from the State Department of Education (SDE) for their high achievement in mathematics during the 2003-04 school year. The SDE funded the research team—one of several teams—with the expressed intent of gathering data that might explain the schools' high achievement in face of the challenges associated with low community socioeconomic status. Our team was identified as the one with a rural focus, and we selected rural schools in various parts of the state from a list of all schools in the state that had received the same honorary status. To the extent possible, we focused on the schools in rural communities with the lowest family incomes. Selections made by other research teams, however, limited our choices. As a consequence, our schools—all of which reportedly exhibited free and reduced lunch rates above 40% in the previous school year—nevertheless varied in terms of community socioeconomic status. This variability, which simply represented an artifact of site selection, actually enabled the comparisons productive of the analysis provided in this paper.

Even though the SDE asked the research teams primarily to derive “lessons learned” from the high achieving schools, we negotiated a broader focus consistent with a wider set of research purposes. Whereas we met our contractual obligations by providing reports that were responsive to the SDE's interest, we also collected more data, engaged in more rigorous data analysis procedures, and interpreted findings with a more critical eye than the contract required. As a result, we were able to investigate not only the ways mathematics was conceived and taught in these schools, but also the culture of each school, teachers' and administrators' views about their work, and the connection between the school and the local community.

In order to gather participants' perspectives on a wide range of issues, we developed interview schedules for each group of participants—students, parents, teachers, administrators, and non-parent community members. Each interview schedule provided open-ended questions such as, “What impact do the characteristics of the school

community have on academic performance?” “How does the school board function in this district?” “What is the school doing to help low achievers?” We then held one-on-one training sessions with each of the researchers whom we had employed to collect data. During these sessions, we reviewed principles of semi-structured interviewing, methods for getting access to participants at the case study sites, techniques for using the observation protocol, and other practical matters relating to data gathering.

For each school, including the one discussed in this paper, one researcher spent approximately five days collecting data. Interviews included one-on-one conversations with adult informants and focus-group discussions with students. The member of our research team who visited the site described in this case study conducted a total of 25 interviews lasting from 30–90 minutes and observed in five classrooms once (and sometimes twice) for periods of time lasting from one to two hours. All interviews were transcribed, and transcripts were prepared for analysis with Atlas-Ti software. This software package, like several others on the market, enables researchers to code qualitative data, combine data elements in various ways, and query coded and combined data elements in order to identify conceptual and theoretical linkages.

Analysis proceeded in two stages—the first primarily focused on the issues of interest to the SDE and the second on the more wide-ranging issues of interest to us. For the initial analysis, we made use of a set of 43 *a priori* codes, drawn from a wide reading of the literature on rural education, mathematics education, school improvement, and social-class dynamics. With Atlas-Ti as the interface, two members of the research team read through transcripts, field notes, and observation protocols, attaching one or more codes to each meaningful segment of text. Sometimes the data analysts tagged a passage with just one relevant code, but often they connected two or more codes to a particular passage. By using this approach and the aggregation tools available in Atlas-Ti, the researchers were able to combine and recombine data in order to identify patterns.

For example, the following quote from observation notes was given two codes, “community engaged” and “teaching individualized”: “This is a special class established just for the Amish students. These students end their formal education after eighth grade.” In this school and another in the study, we found that educators' statements revealing concern for community engagement were often associated with their statements revealing interest in providing differentiated instruction to individual students or to distinct groups of students. Using the analysis software to examine the relationship of coded passages, we were thus able to identify a possible pattern in the data.

Because the passages of interest to the analysis presented here related mostly to the character of the community

and informants' perspectives about school-community relations, our initial analytic scheme invariably resulted in their coding with one or more of the following conceptual labels: "community engaged," "community disengaged," "community elitist," or "community egalitarian." Many passages also were flagged with other codes. For example, one passage relating to the principal's specific efforts to reach out to the community was flagged with the following codes: "community engaged," "school improvement events," and "principal—transformational." At the first stage of data analysis, the researchers used this coding scheme to derive categories of greater generality and, from those categories, emergent themes. These were presented in the case study reports and cross-case analysis that the researchers delivered to the SDE.

At the second stage of the analysis, which again included data from all schools, the researchers reread and recoded the data in a more fine-grained way, using an inductive method in which different ideas in the quotations were flagged with synoptic keywords. This recoding process yielded a total of 54 keyword codes, 33 of which pertained to the case described in the present case study. Of these 33, 16 had some bearing on social-class dynamics and were therefore directly pertinent to an understanding of the pervasive egalitarianism reported in this case study. Working with the text that was flagged with the 16 codes that dealt with social-class dynamics, the researchers used Atlas-Ti to develop networks of related constructs and, through that process, to identify salient themes explaining the character of social-class relations in the six schools.

Case studies for each of the schools—the current one included—explored four emergent themes: (1) *in loco parentis*, (2) teaching middle-class behaviors, (3) extolling the virtue of a college degree, and (4) "othering" the children of the poor. In four of the six schools, we explained social-class dynamics in relationship to educators' explicit and concerted efforts to "save the children of the poor" (Howley, Howley, & Howley, 2006). They did so by extending *in loco parentis* beyond its legal requirements, teaching middle-class values directly and rewarding behaviors that were acceptable to a middle-class sensibility, and by communicating the belief that a college degree is mandatory for success in life. Seeing poor families as "other" certainly was part of the ideology behind teachers' efforts to save poor children in the first four schools, but "othering" the *children* of the poor did not take place there. In the fifth school, however, social class was a sharp marker of difference, and the reported actions of educators and middle-class parents appeared to indicate systematic efforts to denigrate and exclude the poor *and their children*. The attitudes and practices evident in both types of school community were familiar to us based on our years of working in rural Appalachia. But Willemsburg Elementary

School,¹ the "counter-factual" case—the one where the logic was completely reversed—was something we had not encountered before. For this case, therefore, it made some sense to recast the emergent themes in the following way to reflect the unique experience of social class relations in this school community: "in league with parents," "teaching agrarian values," "educating for community participation," and "embracing all children."

Case Study Findings

Willemsburg Elementary School enrolls about 200 students in its nine grade levels (i.e., K-8). It is one of four elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school in a rural school district with an overall student enrollment of about 1,700. By conventional standards, most district residents are poor and working class. Among households in the district, about 30% have annual incomes less than \$30,000 and about 45% have incomes from \$30,000 up to \$60,000 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Approximately 40% of students are considered economically disadvantaged because they meet eligibility requirements for free or reduced-price lunches. The median household income in the district is approximately \$39,000. Average teacher salary is about \$41,000, and approximately 25% of the teachers hold at least a master's degree. Although all students at Willemsburg Elementary are white, the school arguably incorporates a considerable amount of cultural diversity, resulting from the fact that approximately 40% of its students are Amish.

The number of Amish children attending the school had, reportedly, increased in recent years. According to stories, a previous principal had effectively driven a wedge between the school and the community, but a new principal altered the school culture making it far more accessible and inviting to Amish and "English" families alike. The new principal recently established a special seventh and eighth grade for children from Amish families. The curriculum in these classes incorporated activities relevant to Amish intentions for their children. In other words, the activities provided academic instruction through a focus on issues related to farming, home economy, and appreciation for the natural world. We observed that all students in the seventh and eighth grade were Amish males. Non-Amish children attend the district's consolidated middle school: as yet no "English" parents have asked that their children attend the Willemsburg seventh and eighth grades. It is of interest that this rural school, with grades seven and eight previously removed to the district's consolidated middle school has, with the implementation of an "Amish" program, restored the purloined grades to the Willemsburg community. If

¹ Willemsburg is a pseudonym.

the Amish remain at the Willemsburg school, one might anticipate that some “English” students may one day join their Amish classmates in grades seven and eight.

Egalitarianism and a Communitarian Ethos

The school community at Willemsburg was unique among the communities we have worked in and studied over the years (including the other five communities in the larger study of which this case study is a part) for exhibiting no direct—and precious few oblique—disparagements of the poor. The Willemsburg transcripts, as anyone familiar with case study research would expect, exhibited variance on the themes identified in the study. But the variance included almost no evidence of negative views about the poor or even of much awareness of social class as a salient construct. Instead, the evidence pointed to a pervasive egalitarianism that perhaps came from or perhaps produced a collectivist and communitarian ethos.

A comment from one parent captured the communitarian spirit that seemed to characterize this school community:

There’s not a difference between the rich and the poor.² I mean, you can have a club and you’ve got poor, you’ve got all kinds of incomes in there and it’s not—it doesn’t make a difference. You’ve got, especially with the Amish, you need help with something, they’re right there to help. And they’re a big factor in this community. I mean, it’s, and it’s not just the Amish. I mean, anybody in the community would do almost anything for you.

Communitarianism in Action

As mentioned above, analysis of data from the larger study of which this case was a part resulted in the identification of four emergent themes with relevance to school-community relations. In descriptions of the study as a whole (Howley et al., 2006), we framed these themes with language that made reference to two dominant perspectives, one that embodied extreme disparagement of the poor and another that embodied moderated disparagement. Here, because we are describing a “counter-factual” case, we use different language to name the themes.

In league with parents. In four other schools in the study, educators explicitly claimed to have a parental sort of concern for the children of the poor, whom they believed lacked appropriate parenting from their own families. But at Willemsburg, the stance was different. Instead of seeking to take the place of parents, the educators engaged parents as active participants in the life of the school. In fact, the Willemsburg community as a whole exhibited ownership of

the school, playing an important role in defining its mission, contributing to its governance, and participating in its daily life. The superintendent claimed, for instance, “We want to create an atmosphere or a climate where parents and even beyond parents, community members in general, feel welcome at our schools.” The superintendent went further than this in characterizing the culture of Willemsburg Elementary School.

Susan [the Willemsburg principal] uses the phrase “learning community,” and I think we really have that here—a learning community, where it’s not just about teachers and it’s not just about the school personnel, but it’s really about the community at large.

This passage is an unusual testament from any American educator in the 21st century because—counter to the typical claim that state and federal initiatives have usurped local engagement—it strongly suggests that the school belongs to the community (e.g., Mathews, 1996; Meier, 2004; Noguera, 2004).

Moreover, as Paul Theobald (1997) asserts, the ideology, rhetoric, and practice of American schooling centers itself on benefits accruing to individuals on behalf of the state. Instead of assuming the state’s prerogative to *take the place* of parents and to override community interests, the Willemsburg school would seem to *take the part* of community. Instead of supplanting an allegedly troubled role, that is, the role of parent, the school would appear to augment an acknowledged legitimate role, that is, the role of sustaining families and the community as a whole.

Quotes from community members confirm this interpretation. For example, one parent described the principal’s efforts to demonstrate support for the community:

I know that [supporting the community] has been a big goal of [the principal] since she’s come to our district. Previous principals, or a particular principal, really damaged the relationship between the school and the community. So I know that coming in ... that that was a challenge for her and probably because of her awareness of that, she talked to us about how important the community is to the district.

Teachers’ practices implemented this perspective on a daily basis, and we observed numerous parents taking teachers up on the offer to participate actively. As one teacher commented,

My door’s always open. They can spend 15 minutes; they can spend the whole day, any day they want. I think that’s important, so that they can see what’s going on in the classroom, and so I always welcome them by doing that.

² This passage is notable for being the *only* one in the entire Willemsburg transcripts in which the word *poor* appears. The word *poverty* does not appear at all.

And a parent volunteer described in the following way the school's efforts to engage parents: "Most of the time, it's good, by inviting parents in, and you're opening yourself up to them seeing and hearing things—not always good. But I think it carries over into the school."

As this comment suggests, Willemsburg educators gave parents and community members free access to observe them in action—even if such scrutiny turned out to reveal the school's limitations and problems. And a variety of comments from participants also indicated that educators were attentive to parents' and community members' perspectives about what was going on in the school although their perspectives sometimes challenged professional consensus. We saw ample evidence of such responsiveness—perhaps most dramatically in the decision of the district to establish a seventh and eighth grade program designed explicitly for the needs of Amish families.

Teaching agrarian values. Because the school was not setting out to rescue the poor, teaching middle-class behavior—accumulation, "high" aspirations, planning, orderliness—was not an explicit agenda. We found no reference in the transcript material to a middle class, for instance. Nonetheless, the middle-income (\$30-60,000) bracket in the district contained the plurality of households. It may be that "middle-class values" simply prevailed as the informing ethos at Willemsburg.

Given the influence of Amish culture, however, another interpretation seems more plausible. On this view, values were at play, but they were grounded in the agrarian conservatism of Amish culture. As one of the "English" community members noted,

We are a farming community with simple values. We believe in helping one another, being honest and trustworthy, and having respect for one another. I think you can see that in most of our students. The Amish are certainly a factor. While their beliefs may be different, you couldn't ask for better people when it comes to helping others. Most of the Amish children mirror these qualities that they see in their parents.

Certainly the norms implicit in what we observed fit with this interpretation. For example, in sharp contrast to what we heard at the other schools in the study, we observed few instances of discipline being imposed, and neither parents nor teachers spoke of it in interviews. Second, classrooms at Willemsburg notably used more cooperative learning tactics than other schools in the study. Cooperation was such a theme, in fact, that the principal led the entire school in reciting the related school mission over the intercom: "*United Effort, United Responsibility, United Success.*" If, as Theobald has it, schooling along conventional, arguably middle-class, American lines centers on individualism, then something else—more communitarian and less individual,

more cooperative and less competitive—was going on at this school, and seemed deeply entrenched there.

Educating for community participation. With 40% of its students coming from homes of Amish patrons, readers will not be surprised to hear that Willemsburg Elementary did not "extol" college-going. In part, silence on this point³ may be a function of school level; we did, however, hear mention of the importance of college attendance among elementary teachers elsewhere. The school and district personnel were nonetheless aware that most Amish children would *not* attend college—a decision they appeared to respect and which they even seemed to understand. Arguably, such an appreciation gave Willemsburg educators a different outlook on college attendance from that held by educators elsewhere—where college-going was regarded as a social marker of success in life.

Even though preparation for college was not a motive for educating children well, academic engagement was much in evidence at Willemsburg. The teachers we observed involved students in learning activities throughout the day, and instructional methods eliciting active participation and critical thinking were more in evidence at this school than at any other in the larger study.

In our research protocols, the place of and conduct of mathematics education was an issue specifically addressed in interviews. We wanted to know what educators were doing with mathematics and why. Willemsburg Elementary was the only school in the study to have adopted one of the new mathematics curricula with an explicit focus on problem-solving and mathematical thinking. The impetus for the adoption reportedly came from teachers, who wanted a more "authentic" or "hands-on" format. The faculty investigated alternatives, and the school eventually adopted *Everyday Math* (University of Chicago School Mathematics Project, 2006). Parents reportedly had difficulty accepting the program, but, in keeping with the ethos, "united effort, united responsibility," teachers worked to help them understand it. There were many comments to this effect in the transcript data, but one parent's remarks characterized the general sentiment:

The new math program? Ah, there's been a lot of talk about it. I don't know. I suppose it would be the community, it would just be me talking to other parents and all of us, especially in the beginning of the year, you know, freaking out, you know, about what they were doing.... So, there was a lot of concern, but as the year's progressed and I've seen what they've been introduced to and actually understand, you know, fractions. It's amazing what, and even my first grader, and then I've talked quite a bit to the teachers about,

³ The only use of the word *college* is in the recollection of teachers' own undergraduate experiences.

you know, if I have a concern, you know, where it's going, so, you know, that helps.... I think it's so important to know what's going on and they always, you know, are very responsive to that, so, in our individual case, that really helps our experience in school.

Teachers appeared to have been successful in selling the program to a skeptical and arguably conservative community. It may be that taking the part of the community, being united and responsible about the adoption decision, and making themselves open to concerns was the basis for this apparent success. Mathematics reform adoptions often founder, even in affluent districts, for lack of parental understanding (e.g., Lubienski, 2002). In this small school of 200 students, and perhaps notably, the impetus for engagement with a reform curriculum arose with the teachers. It was not a top-down mandate, as is frequently the case in large schools and districts.

In the absence of college attendance as the ultimate goal of the schooling experience, something else must have been responsible for participants' support for academics. We call that something else, preparation for community participation, on the strength of comments from parents as well as observations of what was taking place in the seventh and eighth grade classroom. Participants, for example, commented about Amish families' commitment to their children's formal education. As one school board member noted,

I think that because so many of our students are Amish, there's a, there's somewhat of an urgency because they often don't go to school, or very many don't go to school past the eighth grade. There's a seriousness about getting what we can in the years that we have. And I think that that seriousness or that commitment follows through into the English community also.

A serious regard for academic learning pervaded all classrooms, but its connection to community life was most striking in the seventh and eighth grade room. There students were observed working on a final project—a paper on a topic related to farming or other relevant interest. This was not what some educators call “place-based” education in the usual sense of the term because the engagement with place and community life was inherent rather than an explicit aim of the instructional activity. Because the students already were engaged with place and community, the teacher did not need to draw their attention to the practical applications of what they were studying. Rather, the students brought practical problems into the classroom from home, and they used formal academic methods to gain greater theoretical knowledge relevant to their practical concerns.

Embracing all children. At Willemsburg, the children of the “others” were Amish. This religious minority group is clearly different from the mainstream. The Amish live among the “English” as a linguistically and culturally distinct rural minority. The distinction between Amish and “English” is dramatically reinforced by the divergent ways the two groups engage the world. Amish are as unmistakable as Hasidic Jews. In general, the Amish are easy, and perhaps frequent, targets of “othering” (e.g., Byers & Crider, 2002).

There was a time at Willemsburg, not long past, when the Amish were seemingly “othered,” or at least not invited to benefit from the local public school, which their taxes support. An “English” parent told the story from her standpoint as someone who elected to rejoin the community after a time away. We quote at some length because of this interviewee's sense of the cultural dynamics involved, and of the community's responsibility to care for this “other:”

Previous principals—or a particular principal, really—damaged the relationship between the school and the community and that was before ... we moved back here. So I know that coming in, I had discussions with her [the new principal] ... and ... I think there's a real sense of our community, and involving the community.... Also, you know, the Amish-versus-the-English, you know, where they have their own schools ... you know, so those parents are choosing to send their kids here, which is probably a little bit of a dissent within their church and stuff. So, they're making the commitment to come here and the Amish community is very supportive. So, it's a good feeling and when I drive down into our little town and into our school, I mean, everybody waves and it's very much what we wanted and why we moved back here.

Despite past treatment of the Amish in Willemsburg and reported treatment of the Amish elsewhere, we neither observed nor heard about any instances where Amish children were denigrated or demeaned. Nor were children singled out for ridicule or, for that matter, for special nurture on the basis of their economic circumstances. The prevailing view seemed to be that membership in the community conferred an entitlement to be treated with respect and appreciated for one's contribution.

Differences in economic circumstance, which clearly existed, had little bearing on the social interactions of community members. As one school board member observed about himself and other members of the board, “We're everyday people ... people from the community. We interact ... very well with the community and that's the overall function. We're common folks.” Whether or not the Amish

influence was responsible for this world view, prevailing norms supported a generous and inclusive version of community life. As one parent described it, “We are a very close knit community—almost like a very large family. People are generous with their help.”

Discussion

We have puzzled now, for some time, about this school, which we have elsewhere identified as the “positive outlier” in a study where the central tendency of the data seemed to be “saving the children of the poor,” a project of retrieving children of the poor in order to bring them into the fold of the local middle class in their rural communities (Howley et al., 2006). If there were comparatively impoverished families in Willemsburg, none of the educators and none of the community members with whom we spoke argued in favor of their retrieval. Apparently no one believed such a project to be necessary.

This finding might be explained by the fact that socioeconomic disparities were not as large in Willemsburg as in the other school communities, and we have explored the merits of this interpretation elsewhere (Howley et al., 2006). But the structural interpretation does not explain the dynamics of everyday life in the Willemsburg school. Rather, the culturalist theories of both Hofstede (1986, 2001) and Williams (1973, 1989) seem to offer interpretative advantages.

On Hofstede’s terms, the Willemsburg transcripts offer abundant evidence of a local culture rather at odds with American norms. This observation can, in fact, be argued for at least four of the five dimensions of culture identified by Hofstede: (1) individualism seems clearly muted compared to the American norm,⁴ certainly as suggested by the school’s slogan (“united effort, etc.”); (2) minimal power distance is clearly indicated by the near-disuse of terms related to poverty—an extreme egalitarianism in a nation already ranked low on power distance; (3) uncertainty avoidance is perhaps implied by the way in which the new mathematics program was adopted by arguably cautious teachers and by the community’s insistence on open communication; (4) as with individualism, the evidence in favor of a judgment of a “feminine” culture from the Willemsburg data seems strong to us: relationships, nurturing, and cooperation are all in evidence from both community and educator informants, as is a lack of testimony stressing conventional measures of success; finally (5) there is evidence, in this agrarian community, of a longer time orientation than prevails in the

national culture; interviewees articulate the past and connect it to present and future.

Among others, Paul Theobald (1997) has specifically noted the cyclical time-orientation and risk averse character of agrarian communities. These observations are germane to the cultural dissonance between the prevailing Willemsburg ethos and the national “culture” of the US as diagnosed by Hofstede. The link is historical and concerns the conversion of the United States from a strongly agrarian society to an industrial and post-industrial world power. The conversion has made of the once agrarian nation of small holders the world leader of a modernist, cosmopolitan society of transnational corporations. The history links the analysis of Hofstede, the avowed modernist, to the critique of Williams, who is avowedly hostile to modernism in its varied manifestations. Willemsburg looks to us like one of Williams’ durable by marginal realms—and its durability is perhaps a proof of the viability of the culture on view there.

In this assessment of durability, moreover, one must particularly prize the strong contribution of Amish culture. Indeed, it seems that the school and the community receive a great deal of instruction from their Amish neighbors and colleagues. Donald Kraybill (e.g., Kraybill & Olshan, 1994), among others (including David Orr, 1994 and Wendell Berry, 1982) has argued for a view of the Amish that disclose them as considerate users of technology, whose consideration is exercised in the name of sustaining community. Nothing in the interview transcripts, in fact, suggests that our “English” interviewees saw the Amish as quaint, ineffectual, or backward. Instead, they seemed to acknowledge their remarkable contribution to the health of both school and community.

One might ask if there are any implications to be drawn from this community’s accomplishment for the rest of the nation. We believe there are—and they have often been drawn by others. David Orr (1996) has argued, for instance, the need to “re-ruralize” American education. Implicit in Wendell Berry’s many observations is the need to make agriculture less industrial and more agrarian. The Amish show how this might be done—their project is not standardized, not globalized, and not acquisitive in an industrial or capitalist sense.⁵ Beyond specifically rural themes, however, the Willemsburg counter-text to the national culture suggests that an egalitarian version of community, as many scholars have argued, is a clearly functional part of life. Its functionality is perhaps so great that, once supplanted by a primary devotion to individualism, human lives are subject to otherwise avoidable threats and disasters. Individualist competition may not provide all

⁴ Scores for nations studied by Hofstede are available in his printed works but also online at <http://www.clearlycultural.com/geert-hofstede-cultural-dimensions/>. Briefly, the US is low on power distance, highest of all nations on individualism, high-middle on masculinity, low-middle on uncertainty avoidance, and low on long-term orientation.

⁵ Whereas the Amish participate in small-scale manufacture as well as in trade, they do not establish large multi-national corporations in order to amass profit.

the benefits that the champions of American leadership of globalization suggest it will.

There is, in conclusion, another implication, perhaps less contentious, to draw. This school was the only one among those we studied to retain its honorary status for doing well by impoverished students over the long term. The other schools in the study lost ground in the years following this study. It seems that united effort continued to yield united results in the Willemsburg school. Our hopeful speculation is that schooling founded on cooperation, hard work, and relationships may offer truer education than the dominant version of schooling, founded on greed (i.e., global economic combat) and vanity (i.e., individual victory over all other global economic warriors). One imagines that Raymond Williams would agree.

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