

Sense of Community and Parent Involvement in Missouri Mennonite and Amish  
Schools

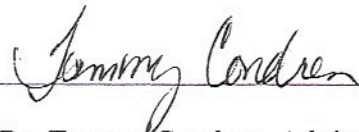
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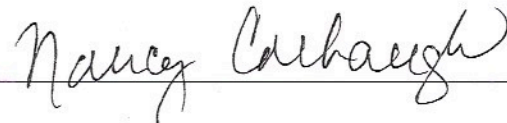
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Sense of Community and Parent Involvement in Missouri Mennonite and Amish Schools

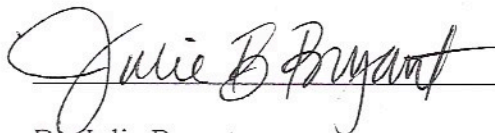
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SENSE OF COMMUNITY AND PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN MISSOURI  
MENNONITE AND AMISH SCHOOLS

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A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate Education Department  
Southwest Baptist University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

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By

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December 5, 2019

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this ethnographic case study was to investigate the integral role of sense of community and parent involvement in Old Order Mennonite and Amish schools and the impact of these factors on education. These factors are lacking in public education, and this study sought to fill the gap by learning from a setting strong in both, the Amish and Old Order Mennonite schools. Epstein's (2001) spheres of influence guided the research as she redefined the relationship between schools, families, and communities as one of overlapping spheres of influence that share a concern about the success of the child in education. This research supported those findings in that the Amish and Mennonite communities overlap all areas of life, school, church, home, and community. Through parent and teacher interviews, student journals, visitor logs, as well as classroom observations, the researcher was able to uncover themes associated with parent involvement and sense of community. The findings revealed themes such as structure and order, families, strong work ethic, proximity to schools, communicating, and language, which helped foster parent involvement in an Old Order Mennonite and Amish school. Additionally, building strong bonds, being service oriented, creating a sense of belonging and humility fostered a sense of community in an Old Order Mennonite and Amish school.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The concept of community and parental involvement with families and the school is a vital one that can produce great rewards for all concerned. Researchers have found evidence that higher levels of involvement by parents are related to academic success for students (Epstein, 2001; Epstein & Sanders, 2002).

Studying parent involvement to assist the educational research base is important, as parental involvement is known to be linked to improved behavior, regular attendance, and positive attitudes. Therefore, children are more likely to have higher self-esteem, have more self-motivation, and tend to achieve better grades regardless of ethnic, social, or racial backgrounds. Additionally, research indicates that two-thirds of teachers believe parental involvement in education results in better performance in school (Epstein, 2001). Parental involvement and sense of community in the public school setting should be of enduring importance, as family engagement remains critical to student achievement. Research has found that family engagement in schools improves student academic achievement, reduces absenteeism, and restores parents' confidence in their children's education (Garcia & Thornton, 2015). Garcia and Thornton argue parent involvement involves setting goals with children and fostering achievement of those goals, while using children's academic scores to produce

progress, and developing a relationship with teachers. The most significant type of involvement is what parents do at home. Children's learning is supported when families, students, and teachers come together to create a community (Sapungan & Sapungan, 2014). Research suggests that academic success may be predicted by the quality of the community connections (Booth & Dunn, 1996; Lau, Li, & Rao, 2011). Most often, those opportunities begin at home and in the context of an individual's surroundings.

Learning to see through the eyes of another culture helps us to see ourselves and to liberate our thinking (Fishman, 1988). The Old Order Mennonite and Amish community represent a culture that mainstream public educators may benefit from studying in order to foster a greater sense of community and stronger parent involvement in public education. Mennonite and Amish members embrace the value of family and community with a shared vision of following Jesus Christ in all aspects of life and a desire to live a simple life. Old Order Mennonite and Amish embrace the idea of community in all areas of life, including education and the classroom (Fishman, 1988; Hannah, 2013; Kraybill & Hurd, 2008). This ethnographic study attempts to provide a deeper understanding of the culture of parent involvement and a sense of community in Old Order Mennonite and Amish schools. Revealing key elements may assist educators in the public school setting.

### **Mennonite History**

The Mennonite church is a branch of the Christian church with its roots in

Protestant belief. The Mennonites are named after and influenced by the teachings and tradition of Menno Simons, a one-time Catholic priest (1496-1561). Simons rejected the Catholic Church's teachings and joined the Anabaptists, a new movement started in 1536, known for re-baptizing adult believers. Mennonites converted to Anabaptists for their belief in adult baptism. They disagreed with infant baptism and called for a community of believers or "rebaptizers" who agreed with the practice of adult baptism based on the confession of faith. The denouncing of infant baptism was more than symbolic; it was a challenge to both church and civil authority as well as a violation of ecclesiastical and civil law. Baptism represented the voluntary commitment of the adult believer not only to the church, but also to the closed community of believers, and adult baptism represented a contract or covenant with God and community (Fishman, 1988; Hannah, 2013; Kraybill & Hurd, 2008). History has documented the Mennonite followers' migration to America from Switzerland in the late 1600's during a time of disruption and distrust. Early Mennonites in Europe were thought of as knowledgeable farmers and were asked to take over poor soils and enrich them through hard work and good sense. However, the governing bodies would take back the land and force the Mennonites to move on since they would offer no resistance. Therefore, the migration to America started, and the Colonists welcomed them. They settled on farms and began agriculture in order to sustain an income.

New Order Mennonites, today, are a distinct branch of the Old Order

Mennonites (B. Yoder, personal communication, March 29, 2018). New Order Mennonites share the same five cultural themes; however, some modernization has been allowed in the community (Carlson, Taylor, & Levin, 1998). There is a large scope of worship, doctrine, and traditions among Mennonite groups today. Old Order Mennonites are known to use horse and buggy for transportation and speak Pennsylvania Dutch. They refuse to participate in politics. Additionally, most Old Order Mennonite groups also send their children to church-operated schools. Traditionally, the farm equipment consisted of horses, but within the past 10 years, some are now using steel-wheeled tractors for farm work (Carlson et al., 1998).

New Order Mennonites dress conservatively while accepting most technology. New Order Mennonites are independent of each other. Various New Order Mennonites have integrated the use of automobiles, electricity, and some basic forms of electronic communication. Conservative Mennonite branches continue to dress simply, and women wear the required head covering. However, moderate Mennonites require no particular types of dress and no restrictions on the use of technology. They emphasize peace, community, and service. Despite the difference in the various Mennonite branches, their faith is the focus for all Mennonites, and education is grounded in religion (Roth, 2011).

Hostetler and Huntington (1971) suggest there are five cultural themes that differentiate Old Order Mennonites from other Christian denominations.

- Separation from society while also rejecting the modern world
- Following the Mennonite faith in all areas of life
- Abiding by the rules of the specific congregation
- Members who disobey are subject to ex-communication
- Acceptance of labor and hard work in the fields and at home as it promotes purity

Old Order Mennonites hold to a variety of key beliefs. One key distinguishing factor is the practice of separation from the world. Old Order Mennonites, as well as Amish, share in the idea of creating their own communities separate from the rest of society.

- The belief that God exists and became flesh through Jesus Christ
- All scripture is inspired by God through the Holy Spirit
- God created humans in His image and humanity has sinned at the age of accountability
- God offers salvation through faith in Jesus
- The church's mission is to proclaim the kingdom of God
- Full emersion water baptism is a sign of washing away sin and a commitment to follow Jesus
- The Lord's Supper (Communion) is a sign by which the church remembers the new covenant which Jesus established by his death
- The church is considered one body

- The belief that to be a disciple of Jesus is to know life in the Spirit
- God wants all people to become part of the church, and the church encourages loving faithfulness in marriage
- The belief in the commitment to telling the truth, to avoid the swearing of oaths, and to be a good steward of God's blessings
- The will of God is peace led by the Holy Spirit, and individuals follow the will of Christ practicing peacefulness, especially in the face of violence
- The belief that the church is God's holy nation and faith is placed in the belief that Christ will come again

Old Order Mennonites can be confused with the Amish as the two groups hold some of the same beliefs and practices. Amish are Mennonites, but not all Mennonites are Amish. The Amish are a breakoff of the Mennonites, and both groups believe in continuous study of the Bible and practicing living a life free from sin after conversion and adult baptism. Mennonites and Amish believe and practice the separation from the world and establish communities separate from the rest of society and avoid technology. Mennonite Christians strive not to be tempted by worldly things and believe in living in the world but not being of the world (Carlson et al., 1998).

Furthermore, Mennonites are committed to nonviolence. A characteristic of Old Order Mennonites and Amish is their commitment to pacifism, and therefore, they attempt to settle disputes peacefully (Roth, 2011). Amish and Old

Order rarely seek out law enforcement, as the culture is that of non-resistance (Roth, 2011). Due to Mennonites practicing peacefulness, they believe war is never the answer to solving the world's problems.

Attention has been given to the ethical teachings in the New Testament and the Sermon on the Mount. Mennonite Christians are to gather in communities, reject the outside world, war, violence, and refuse to take oaths. Life in the community is intended to be simple, and individual differences in wealth and status deemphasized. Mennonites believe the Bible says that Christians may possess property and recognize that all things come from God. Additionally, they believe in practicing effective stewardship (Carlson et al., 1998; Roth, 2011).

### **Problem Statement**

The sense of community and parent involvement in public education have been found to be associated with a child's academic performance (Hill & Craft, 2003). Yet, despite efforts of school administrators, teachers, and staff for increased parent involvement, school districts are seeing a lack of these vital aspects in the school setting. Parental involvement consisting of teacher meetings, school events, volunteering, attendance at a general meeting, and serving on a committee, rose significantly between 1999 and 2007 then fell on all measures in 2012 (Child Trends, 2013).

In 2007, 89% of students in kindergarten through twelfth grade had parents who attended a general meeting, compared with 78% in 1999. In 2012,

87% had a parent who attended a scheduled meeting with a teacher, and 46% had a parent who volunteered in school or served on a committee, compared with 73%, 65%, and 37% in 1999. However, in 2012, the trends showed a fall regarding parents who attended a scheduled meeting to 76%, and 42% of parents that volunteered or served on a committee (Child Trends, 2013). Research shows, 78% of students in grades kindergarten through twelfth grade had parents attend a parent-teacher conference, 43% had parents who volunteered or served on a school committee (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

In comparison, Mennonite schools share a collective identity regarding a shared vision of community (Adkins, 2009; Eisenbise, 2009; Hannah, 2013; Roth, 2011). The sense of community in Mennonite schools binds teachers, parents, and students together in order to focus on academic achievement (DeWalt & Troxell, 1989). According to a survey conducted by the Shalom Mennonite School (2016), 82% of respondents reported positive relations with parents and described the culture of the school as a “core of supportive and engaged parents.” Additionally, eighty-two percent of respondents reported a positive school culture and noted the atmosphere of the school as a “culture of grace” (Shalom Mennonite School, 2016). Respondents expressed gratitude for good relationships between staff and students. The conclusion of the survey indicated teachers and parents help cultivate a positive school culture (Fiore, 2016). Examining the integral role of the sense of community and the relationship to parent involvement

in an Old Order Mennonite school may assist public educators in fostering a greater sense of community.

### **Purpose for Study**

The purpose of this ethnographic qualitative multiple case study is to investigate the integral roles of sense of community and parent involvement in Old Order Mennonite and Amish schools and the impact of these factors on education. Researching community and parental connections implemented in a variety of settings and cultures is imperative in order to create one's sense of belonging and to support students. One culture, which may be overlooked due to inaccessibility, is that of the Old Order Mennonite community and Amish community. Research shows, when families and schools, as well as the community, work together to support learning, children tend to succeed in school, stay in school longer, and like school more. Additionally, when schools work with families to build bonds that respond to their concerns and value their contributions, they are successful in maintaining connections that are aimed at improving student success (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

### **Research Questions**

This study explores the sense of community and parental involvement in Old Order Mennonite and Amish schools. The following research questions guided this study.

1. What can be learned from the Old Order Mennonite school and Amish school setting regarding parent involvement?
2. What can be learned from the Old Order Mennonite school and Amish school setting regarding a sense of community?
3. In what ways, if any, do the findings of this study relate to the public school setting?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study can be seen through the lens of ethnography and is grounded in the principals of Joyce Epstein's spheres of influence. A 2002 book titled *School, Family, and Community Partnerships*, described a link between school, family, and community as spheres of influence. She argued a child's educational development is enhanced when the three spheres or environments work collaboratively toward shared goals. Epstein developed a framework for defining and developing school, family, and community partnerships that includes six types of involvement. The interview questions were based on the following Epstein (2001) spheres of influence framework: (a) parent involvement, (b) parental activity and participation, (c) sense of community, (d) belonging/identity, (e) cohesion/solidarity, (f) parenting, and (g) communicating (Epstein, 2002).

The research of Epstein defines the relationship between schools, families, and communities as overlapping spheres of influence that share a common interest about the success of the child in education (Epstein, 2002). Epstein explains the age of the child and the experiences of the child, family, and school

can influence the degree to which schools, families, and communities have mutual interests and influences on the child. Typically, parents seem to be more involved in the school when children are young. Therefore, Epstein's partnership model would depict a greater overlap of parents and schools for a first grader than a high school student (Epstein & Sanders, 2002).

The second component of the partnership model includes interpersonal relationships and patterns of influence that are most important in a child's education. The relationships may consist of an interrelationship within the organizations and interactions between the organization (school) and families. The pattern of interactions then influences the various levels of the relationship with the child being in the center. These interactions may consist of any type of communication, including notes home, newsletters, parent meetings, or conferences. The child is then changed by the interactions and, therefore, produces change in others (Epstein, 2001). The overlapping sphere is a shared interest that the child is successful.

An aspect of the overlapping spheres of influence is that schools and families share similar characteristics. Epstein uses the terms "school-like families" and "family-like schools" (Epstein, 2002, p.12). She explains the terms as ways to understand the behaviors of families and schools that have an invested, mutual interest. In school-like families, parents encourage, support, and develop their children's academic skills. In comparison, family-like schools take on the attitudes and characteristics of a caring family. These attributes may include

individualizing attention to meet individual circumstances and creating reciprocal relationships between teachers, students, and their families, therefore benefiting the child (Epstein & Sanders, 2002).

Edgar Schein developed a model of organizational culture to make an organization more aware of the culture and to bring about a transformation process and cultural change (Schein, 2010). According to Edgar Schein, an organization's culture is directly influenced by direct and indirect mechanisms. Schein identifies three distinct levels of organizational culture: artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions. Artifacts include tangible items visible to the organization, while espoused values are what organizations state as their conscious goals, and philosophies. Basic underlying assumptions are the deepest level of culture that is not easily visible, but rather unconscious, taken for granted beliefs and values. A deep-rooted belief system is the essence of a culture (Schein, 2010).

### **Limitations/Delimitations**

A noted limitation to this study was access to the Old Order Mennonite school and Amish school. Some Old Order Mennonite and Amish communities have excluded outsiders; however, contact was made, and access to schools was granted. Although access to the schools was granted, limitations need to be noted regarding developing the necessary contacts and relationships between the researcher and the Mennonite community and participants. This study was delimited to two schools in Missouri, one Amish and one Mennonite, and

encompassed the participants in a real-life setting and in its social context. The assumption was that participants would respond to interview questions openly and honestly, allowing for a deeper understanding regarding the sense of community and parent involvement in the Mennonite culture.

### **Design Controls**

This case study used a qualitative research approach. The focus of the case study was an Old Order Mennonite school and an Amish school in Missouri. The researcher conducted a screening procedure in order to screen participants for willingness to participate in the study and to determine the sample selection. The study consisted of primary and secondary data. The case study addressed qualitative research data consisting of observation and documentation of participants, interviews, and surveys in order to seek a greater understanding of the case study. Secondary data consisted of documents and historical data.

### **Key Definitions**

Key definitions are noted concerning further understanding of the case study being examined.

**Attendance Center.** District students of the same age and/or grade span attend the same school (National Education Association, 2019).

**Charter School.** Public, tuition-free schools that operate independently and allow for more tailored programs in order to meet the personalized needs of the community, rather than adhering to state or federal guidelines (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2017).

**Community Schools.** Schools that students attend in the community nearest to their home address (National Education Association, 2019).

**Sense of Community.** Creating a community of families, students, teachers, and school administrators provides additional support for children's learning (Sapungan & Sapungan, 2014). Epstein (2001) notes a sense of community includes a sense of belonging/identity as well as influence and cohesion/solidarity.

**Magnet School.** A school designed to encourage racial integration by incorporating students from different communities within the same area and focuses on a specific set of skills, such as gifted and talented or math and science (Siegel-Hawley & Frankenberg, 2011).

**Mennonite.** A member of a religious sect embracing Anabaptism (adult baptism; Kraybill, 2001).

**Ordnung.** A set of written rules and regulations that governs the Amish-Mennonite behavior and culture of the community and school (Kraybill, 2001).

**Parent Involvement.** Involvement includes parent-child interactions that communicate positive attitudes about school and the importance of education to the child (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). Epstein (2002) notes parent involvement is defined through the level of commitment, parental activity, and participation.

**Parochial School.** Primary or secondary private schools run by a religious organization. (Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 2018).

## Summary

Parent involvement and a sense of community should be of utmost importance in the public school setting as it sets the stage for increased student achievement and engagement in students. Recent studies have shown a decline in parent involvement and a sense of community, especially in middle school and secondary school (Child Trends, 2013). However, a sense of community can be seen woven throughout the Mennonite and Amish everyday life, and parent involvement and community is embraced in all aspects of life. The following review of the literature investigates the culture embedded within the Mennonite and Amish community. Prior studies were reviewed to uncover themes applicable to the current study. This study sought to examine the topics of the sense of community and parent involvement in the Mennonite school, as well as in the public schools. In order to lay a foundation, the history of the Mennonite church was explored. The review attempted to make connections between the Amish and Mennonite school communities in order to reveal factors, patterns, and commonalities that might be applied in public school communities. Chapter Three describes the methods for gathering and analyzing the schools and their data. Chapter Four presents the research findings, and Chapter Five will provide a summary of the research and the importance of this study for future educational research.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

Relevant and meaningful parent involvement is a powerful predictor of high student achievement. Students experience a greater extent of educational success when parent involvement is a priority. Additionally, students whose families are involved in their education typically receive higher grades, test scores, complete more homework, have better attendance, and exhibit more positive attitudes and behaviors (Caplan, 2000). Higher graduation rates have also been noted regarding parent involvement (Caplan, 2000; Norton, 2003; Riggins-Newby, 2004). Studies have shown the positive benefits from productive parent involvement continue regardless of students' ethnic or racial background as well as socioeconomic status. Additionally, students considered at greater academic risk have the most to gain when schools involve parents (Caplan, 2000; Funkhouser & Gonzales, 1997; Henderson, 1989).

Families that feel the sense of community within the school setting have shown to become more involved in their child's education and, therefore, have a greater understanding of what is being taught in the classroom and school system. Additionally, parents are more aware of their child's learning abilities as well as programs and services offered by the school (Caplan, 2000; Drake, 2000; Moorman, 2002). Educators also benefit when family involvement is increased, and the sense of community is present, as schools may gain awareness and

identify family strengths and, therefore, support student success (Caplan, 2000). When the sense of community increases, teachers and parents can connect learning in meaningful ways (Ferguson, 2004).

Unfortunately, parental involvement has been shown to decline with the age of the student. Studies have observed that by the fourth grade, parental involvement tends to decline (Kohl, Lengua, & McMahon, 2000). Some distractors of parent involvement include parents demonstrating uncertainty about how to help while also trying to give their children more space as adolescents.

### **School Organization**

School organization in the United States began in 1635 with the establishment of the first public all-boys school in Boston, Massachusetts. However, most learning took place in the home with children taught by parents or tutors. It was not until the American Revolution that Thomas Jefferson argued the need for an educational system in America. He suggested the educational system be funded by tax dollars. However, his vision did not come to fruition for almost a century.

A few public schools were seen around the country in the 1840's. These schools were only possible in communities that could afford them. Horace Mann and Henry Barnard began speaking out regarding the need for a free, compulsory school for every child in America. Mann and Barnard's vision saw the passing of the first mandatory school laws in Massachusetts in 1852, followed by New York.

Eventually, all American children were required to attend elementary school by 1918.

One-room schoolhouses dominated the school organization structure during the 1800 and 1900's. One-room schoolhouses were popular due to the population in rural areas and the limited number of students. The definition of one-room schoolhouses is a school consisting of one classroom where a single teacher taught basic academics to several grade levels of elementary-age boys and girls (Mydland, 2011). The schools were usually the first building erected in a small community and, therefore, became a meeting place for social, political, and religious gatherings. The induction of one-room schools was significant toward the overall goal of better education and schooling.

Due to the range of ages and abilities of students, one-room schoolhouses implemented the mutual instruction method, modeled after British educators Andrew Bell and Joseph Lancaster. This instruction was characterized by older, abled students becoming helpers to the teacher and instructing younger students. The mutual instruction method helped teachers as they dealt with a range of students of various ages and abilities (Mydland, 2011).

The current structure of the United States education follows a systematic pattern. Children ages 3-5 may participate in early childhood education, also known as preschool. Many young children with a developmental delay may be recommended to attend early childhood as an early intervention strategy. Early childhood education is followed by elementary/primary school, middle school,

and then high school. Postsecondary education includes various degrees, including associate, bachelor, master, doctorate, and professional certificates.

**Public School Organization.** Public school has seen a shift in organization recent years. Neighborhood public schools are the schools assigned to all nearby children of a specific grade span. They are named and assigned because of geographic location (Tanner & Lackney, 2006). A neighborhood school is a reflection of its local community (Scully, 2019). Neighborhood schools are driven by two essential components of size and physical proximity. Neighborhood schools tend to hover around a certain size (Barkin, Dryfoos, & Quinn, 2005).

Additionally, children are assigned to schools based on location and physical proximity to a school. Another factor to note is governance concerning city and district boundaries. When the local student population exceeds its appropriate attendance number, a new school is built based on the two essential factors. However, if a school's attendance indicates a trend of low attendance, the school may be combined with another school based on the same principles (Barkin et al., 2005). Neighborhood-based public schools seem to be withering away in many American cities. Factors including declining enrollment, low performance, and education reform movement are assisting in the closing of these schools. Research indicates strengthening the community around a neighborhood school will strengthen the school (Barkin et al., 2005).

Well-designed community schools are a necessity for thriving

communities and require collaboration between school officials and the community. Additionally, the neighborhood or community schools' collaborative movements are opportunities to create a sense of community in the classroom for the betterment of students as well as to offer the ability to create schools for the inclusion of all members of the community (Scully, 2019). A study conducted by the 21<sup>st</sup> Century School Fund, Bookings Institute, and the Urban Institute (2008) found that investment in creating quality neighborhood schools in DC's public schools has the potential to improve enrollment and attract young families, as well as to reestablish an economic base.

The community school movement focuses on the school as a civic entity (Tanner & Lackney, 2006). Additionally, the community/neighborhood school encompasses certain ideals such as: (a) the school is a positive learning environment for the community, (b) community and school partnerships support the interests of the child and the broader interests of the community, (c) schools are places of civic engagement, and (d) members of the community are educational resources (Tanner & Lackney, 2006).

In years past, parents of school-age children could choose between public and private schools. However, the initiation and growth of charter and magnet schools have brought additional options for parents and students.

**Charter and magnet schools.** Charter schools began in an attempt to try different teaching approaches. Ray Budde, (as cited in Siegel-Hawley & Freanckenberg, 2011) a New England teacher, suggested the idea of charter schools in the 1970's.

He argued with school boards to allow teachers the option of various teaching approaches. As a result, the first charter school opened its doors in 1992 in Minnesota, and by 2003, 40 states developed charter laws. Charter schools allow for more tailored programs to meet the personalized needs of the community, rather than adhering to state or federal guidelines (Siegel-Hawley & Frankenberg, 2011).

Additionally, charter school teachers are able to teach in more innovative ways than traditional public schools. Some charters use innovative administrative practices such as merit-based pay for teachers or direct community and parent involvement. Ultimately, charter schools must show academic achievement results within their data in order to continue with the charter school grant program. As a result, many charter schools have closed due to low achievement results. In 2017, more than 6,900 charter schools are serving almost 3.1 million students (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2017).

Magnet schools were designed to encourage inclusion by incorporating students from different communities within the same location. Magnet schools attempt to create a balance of students from all ethnic backgrounds. Magnet schools differ from charter schools as magnet schools focus on a specific set of skills, such as gifted and talented or math and science. Additionally, magnet

schools seem to be more selective in choosing students based on academic ability and behavior. In 2018, there are over 4,340 magnet schools operating in the United States (Wang, Herman, & Dockterman, 2018).

**Private schools.** Schooling in the United States was initially provided by private schools rather than public entities. Once public schooling became the primary provider of education, private schools seemed to fill a need not provided for in the public sector. Private schools are independent, non-governmental, and privately funded. They are not bound by local, state, or national government. Private schools include nonsectarian schools and various religious denominations and non-denominational church organizations. Rather than relying on mandatory taxation funding, private school funding is provided by tuition charged to parents and/or grants (Kisida, Wolf, & Rhinesmith, 2015).

According to the Council for American Private Education (CAPE, 2018), private schools are fueling the alternative school options for parents and students. According to CAPE, one in four schools is now a private school. Additionally, one child in 10 attends a private school, and sixty-seven percent of private high school graduates attend four-year colleges, compared to forty percent of government high school graduates (Council for American Private Education, 2018). Currently, there are 33,740 private schools in the United States, with an average of 456,000 teachers serving 5 million students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Private schools may represent a stronger, more personalized curriculum than public schools (Kisida, Wolf, & Rhinesmith, 2015).

Additionally, public schools may have a larger student population than private schools, with larger class sizes. Private schools offer fewer students per teacher, which results in more time one-on-one with each student and higher levels of parent satisfaction (Rhinesmith, 2017). Private and parochial schools can offer a more personalized education. Additionally, specialized attention can be given to a student's particular talent or strength. As for parochial schools, they can provide religious instruction that no public school would be allowed to offer. This religion instruction is included in a curriculum that is generally strong academically (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

**Parochial schools.** Parochial schools are primary or secondary private schools run by a religious organization. Historically, American parochial schools have been Catholic schools as well as many Seventh-day Adventist, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Calvinist, and Orthodox Jewish, Mennonite, Amish, and Old Order Mennonite schools. Additionally, the German Lutherans, Orthodox Jews as well as German Lutherans began parochial schools, as did Orthodox Jews (Bauch, 2014; Perko, 2017).

The evolution of the American Catholic parochial school system can be divided into three phases. During the first phase, 1750–1870, parishes attempted to create parochial schools while most Catholic children attended public schools. During the second phase, 1870–1910, the Catholic Church made the decision to separate the Catholic school system. During the third phase, 1910–1940, the Catholic church attempted to model the schools after the public school systems. In

cities with larger Catholic populations (such as Chicago and Boston), there was a continuation of teachers, administrators, and students from one system to the other.

Lutheran education began in 1847 with the establishment of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod with 12 churches that operated 19 schools. The schools were operated by individual congregations, groups of congregations, or associations. The schools were autonomous as they hired their own teachers, selected their own curriculum, and set their own fees (Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 2018). Currently, the LCMS operates the largest Protestant school system in the United States.

The Calvinistic school began around 1847 in Holland, Michigan, with little advancement for almost 40 years due to the thought that public schools in America had enough Christian beliefs. The initial schools were begun and maintained by immigrants that resisted Americanization and looked to the Netherlands for guidance and leadership in education. Calvinistic schools came to understand the cultural differences between America and the Netherlands and, therefore, moved from seeking guidance and leadership from the Netherlands (Oppewal & DeBoer, 1984).

The first Jewish day school began in Germany in response to a greater emphasis on secular studies. Jewish education in the United States saw an increase in Jewish day schools after World War II as dissatisfaction with public schools grew. In 2014, there were 861 Jewish schools in the United States, with

an enrollment of 255,000 from preschool to twelfth grade (Schick, 2014).

Just as other religious organizations created their own schooling institutions, the Mennonites developed their own school as a desire to separate themselves from the world.

**Mennonite School Organization.** Mennonite schools are categorized into Old Order Mennonite schools and New Order Mennonite schools. School subjects such as reading, arithmetic, history, spelling, science, and Bible make up the components of subjects taught within the Amish/Mennonite school, similar to those taught in public schools, excluding Bible (DeWalt & Troxell, 1989). However, the philosophy of education in an Amish/ Mennonite school is vastly different from its counterpart (Ediger, 2005). Early Amish/Mennonite schools used biblical stories and content from the Bible to make up the curriculum. This learning approach was implemented to cover all subjects in the school, allowing for the teaching of spiritual and moral values, integrity, and honesty (Ediger, 2005). Currently, school instruction may begin with Bible reading and prayer; however, religion is not taught in school as that is considered the responsibility of the parents. Rote learning is emphasized over critical thinking skills, with a focus on writing mechanics such as punctuation and spelling. Letter writing is stressed due to its practicality and value to the Amish/Mennonite society (Ediger, 2005). English is the primary language spoken in the school setting; however, German is taught as well, and German or Dutch is mostly spoken in the home and church setting (B. Yoder, personal communication, March 29, 2018).

*Old Order Mennonite.* The organizational structure of an Old Order Mennonite school routinely serves a number of students in one community. Additionally, a Mennonite community may have as many as three to five schools in one area due to the proximity of the school building to each family (B. Yoder, personal communication, March 29, 2018). The number of Old Order Mennonite schools saw a growth increase after the Supreme Court's decision in *Wisconsin vs. Yoder*, 1972. The court's decision relieved the Amish of the need to send their children on to higher education after completing the eighth grade. The Yoder decision allowed for more freedom within the Amish school community, ultimately making way for Old Order Mennonite schools as well. Old Order Mennonite and Amish schools historically stop at eighth grade as individuals feel that an eighth-grade education is sufficient for life in their society, as well as hands-on occupations such as agriculture, manual labor, and craftsmanship. The classroom typically features one room or a two-room layout with four grades in each room (B. Yoder, personal communication, March 29, 2018). Homeschooling is rare among the Old Order Mennonites. Mennonite education expert Karen Johnson-Weiner suggests this is because of homeschooling conflicting with the idea of community, a key element of Amish society (Johnson-Weiner, 2007).

*New Order Mennonite*. Mennonite education has transformed since its beginning (Roth, 2011). Central themes are found in the literature regarding Mennonites taking hold of their own education. Mennonite communities entered the world of education during times when the members may have felt their faith was being threatened in the traditional school setting (Roth, 2011). John Hostetler, (as cited in Roth, 2011 & Yoder, 1999) explained that sending students to public or private educational institutions might result in leading the student away from their core faith and beliefs. Therefore, the Mennonite church explored creating a faith-based school in order to preserve their belief in their own faith for future generations (Roth, 2011; Yoder, 1999).

Today, Mennonite schools vary by the congregation as well as their model of education. However, one collective identity is the shared vision of community and collaboration efforts for the goal of serving Jesus Christ in all areas of life, including the educational setting (Adkins, 2009; Eisenbise, 2009; Hannah, 2013; Roth, 2011). The sense of community is evident in the educational setting of Mennonite schools. Classroom instruction is based on cooperation, with the community being the structure of learning (Fishman, 1988). Mennonite members understand the critical importance of preparing individuals for adult life and significant importance is given to the ideology of education in order to prepare children for a specific occupational skill emphasizing specific talents, abilities, and practical skills (Adkins, 2009; Eisenbise, 2009; Hannah, 2013; Roth, 2011). Efforts are made within the school to enforce the church faith and instill the

attitudes reflective of the beliefs of the congregation. These attitudes embrace humility, modesty, compassion, responsibility, reliability, and appreciation of hard work (Peters, 1987).

Roth (2011) gives a general account regarding formal education in the Mennonite church, clarifying that the Mennonite church in each particular congregation may differ on the philosophy of education. Historically, Mennonite communities and schools have shared the idea that an eighth-grade education is sufficient and adequate in order to acquire the needed skills for basic reading, writing, and mathematical competence. Education is then focused on preparing the individual for occupational skills in order to contribute to the family, community, and church. Families encourage children to take on household and farming chores to instill hard work (Carlson et al., 1998). Furthermore, certain Mennonite communities agree that too much education can have a negative effect on the community as a whole (Carlson et al., 1998). However, some Mennonite communities encourage further schooling for students, and some students even go on to attend college and graduate studies. Mennonite communities select their own curriculum and believe the congregation should not be required to adopt the mainstream culture in the curriculum (Waite & Crockett, 1997).

Conversely, a period of change has been seen within various Mennonite communities and education. A thread was found in the literature in which the church questioned the model of education concerning the need for a possibility of additional technologies, i.e. the Internet. Congregations and communities were

investigating how the education method would change as well as the goals for the future, in order to connect the church globally (Hannah, 2013; Roth, 2011).

According to Kraybill (2001), family involvement and the connection between school families plays a vital part in the Amish/Mennonite school setting. Teachers and families have basic beliefs on the importance of parent involvement. Teachers would like parents to help guide their students with basic homework needs. Likewise, parents have hopes that the teachers would express what needs to be done in the home. Additionally, some confusion and disagreement are found between teachers and families regarding what is considered as parent involvement and how to obtain high parent and family involvement (Epstein, 2001).

### **Parent Involvement**

Parental involvement is active participation between the parent, school, and student (Lebahn, 1995). Research indicates parent involvement produces measurable gains in student achievement (Dixon, 1992). Parental involvement between the student and the school is a vital one and can produce great rewards for all concerned (Murray, Mcfarland-Piazza, & Harrison, 2014). However, some school leaders may not know what the term parental involvement entails (Vandergrift & Greene, 1992). According to Vandergrift and Greene, two key elements play an important role with the school and parent connection regarding parental involvement. One key element is the level of commitment to parental support. Encouraging the student, being sympathetic, reassuring, and

understanding are factors in parental support commitment. The other element needed is a level of parental activity and participation, such as doing something that is observable. Research shows, “This combination of level of commitment and active participation is what makes an involved parent” (Vandergrift & Greene, 1992, p. 57).

Research shows parent involvement declines as students grow older; therefore, parent involvement is lower in secondary schools than in elementary (Murray et al., 2014). Additionally, studies have shown that by the fourth grade, parental involvement tends to decline (Kohl et al., 2000). Some distractors of parent involvement include parents demonstrating uncertainty about how to help while also trying to give their children more space as adolescents.

A possible reason for the lack of parent involvement may be the lack of understanding of the school system regarding nontraditional families (Stouffer, 1992). The nature of the family structure is in a state of change, causing confusion and insecurity (Murray et al., 2014; Wanat, 1992). According to Lebahn (1995), schools must understand that lack of participation by parents does not necessarily mean they are neglecting their responsibilities. Parents may not have the time, resources, or expertise to help (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Wanat, 1992). Lebahn asserts that parents may not believe they have any knowledge valuable to the school system. This may be true when the parent may not have a great deal of education (Dixon, 1992; Vandergrift & Greene, 1992).

The meaningful involvement of parents in their child's schooling can enhance the educational process (McNeal, 2014). Parents can contribute insights and knowledge that complement the professional skills of schools' staffs in ways that strengthen academic and social programs. However, for parent involvement initiatives to be successful, they should be part of a contextually focused school improvement process designed to create positive relationships that support children's total development (Spath, Randall, & Shin, 2008). Parent involvement programs that are instituted in traditional school environments are less likely to yield positive results than those that are part of a more collaborative organizational structure (Sheridan, Kim, Coutts, Sjuts, Holmes, Ransom, & Garbacz, 2011).

Ferlazzo and Hammond (2009), characterize the difference between parent involvement and parent engagement. They argue that schools that involve instead of engage parents are leading with their institutional self-interest and desires. However, schools that engage parents are leading with the parents' self-interests in an effort to develop a genuine partnership. They believe these definitions get to the crux of the difference. When schools are involving parents, ideas and energy tend to come from the schools and from government mandates. School staff might feel they know what the problems are and how to fix them and are generally well-intentioned (Ferlazzo & Hammond, 2009). When schools are engaging parents, ideas tend to be elicited from parents by school staff in the context of developing trusting relationships. More parent energy drives the efforts because the efforts

emerge from parent/community needs and priorities (McNeal, 2014). When schools are engaging parents, they are challenged to do something about what they feel is important to parents. The staff learns what parents believe is important through developing a relationship. Additionally, involving parents may mean the school staff is selecting and directing the task versus engaging parents to become an integral part of the relationship. Schools that engage parents support students by developing beneficial parent relationships that affect the school, community, family, and the student (Ferlazzo & Hammond, 2009).

**Parent Involvement in public school.** The role of families, school relations, and parental involvement in education, as well as a supportive home environment, have been shown to promote achievement across elementary and secondary school levels (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Craft, 2003). Additionally, family-school relations and parental involvement in education have been identified as ways to close demographic gaps in achievement and maximize students potential (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006).

Results of a meta-analysis study, (as cited in Castro et al., 2015) indicated that parental involvement was associated with higher student achievement, including classroom grades and standardized test scores. Achievement scores of students with highly involved parents were higher than the scores of children with less involved parents. Additionally, parental involvement, such as reading with and communicating with one's child, showed a greater impact on academic achievement versus involvement consisting of administrative type tasks (Epstein,

2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005). Jeynes (2005) asserted parental involvement programs assist in supporting student achievement; therefore, schools should adopt strategies to enhance parental involvement, and teachers, principals, counselors, and schools should familiarize themselves with the facts of parental involvement that can support and guide parents regarding steps to become more involved in the school-home connection.

Kohl et al. (2000) observed that by the fourth grade, parental involvement tends to decline. Some distractors of parent involvement include, parents demonstrating uncertainty about how to help, while also trying to give their children more space as adolescents. Parents of middle school students may experience difficulty maintaining a productive parent-school involvement due to multiple teachers (Hill & Craft, 2003). Middle school parent involvement may differ from elementary grades. It may involve more administrative tasks such as fundraising, committee work, or office duties; therefore, parent involvement may not directly involve a child's classroom. Additionally, this type of parent involvement is important for the functioning of the school and often does not provide direct instruction regarding course content that will facilitate involvement with student schoolwork. However, studies have shown helping with homework accelerates as well as interferes with achievement due to the differences in how parents and the teacher present material (Hill & Craft, 2003).

Research shows active parent involvement may decrease at the middle school and high school level while being replaced with more subtle, indirect

forms of parent involvement. Parent involvement at the elementary level may include volunteering, attending school functions, helping with homework, and engaging in reading activities. However, parent involvement in middle school and high school may include a decrease in these activities (Jeynes, 2007; Wang, Hill, & Hofkens, 2014; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). Additionally, research shows parent involvement at home and school appears to decrease from elementary to the high school level due to parents' perceptions that older children need greater autonomy in order to establish their own identity and foster responsibility (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2011; Crosnoe, 2005).

The role that parents play in public education has undergone a dramatic shift in the last decade. Parents' roles have shifted from mostly dropping a child off at school and voting for bond issues to assuming a more direct role in their child's formal education. Parent involvement has been defined in various ways, including activities that parents engage in at home and at school, as well as positive attitudes parents have toward their child's education, school, and teacher (Kohl et al., 2000; Shirvani, 2007).

Parent involvement during a child's early education is consistently found to be positively associated with a child's academic performance (Hill & Craft, 2003). Additionally, children whose parents are more involved in their education have higher levels of academic performance. Measures of parent involvement in public education commonly include the quality and frequency of communication with teachers as well as participation in school functions and activities (Dearing et

al., 2006). Parent involvement also characterizes parents' values and attitudes regarding education and the aspirations they hold for their children (Castro, Exposito-Casas, Lopez-Martin, Lizasoain, Navarro-Asencio, & Gaviria, 2015). Research indicates a positive association between parent involvement in preschool and kindergarten and reading achievement in kindergarten and eighth grade (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005). Longitudinal data on parent involvement and literacy across elementary school suggests that differences in levels of parent involvement, as well as changes in parent involvement within a family, were both predictive of children's literacy skills, and increasing parent involvement during elementary school improved literacy growth (Dearing et al., 2006; Sheridan et al., 2011). Researchers also found a strong link between parent involvement and academic achievement when families had high academic expectations for their children and maintained communication regarding school activities while helping them develop effective reading habits (Castro et al., 2015). Epstein's 2001 framework for parent involvement interventions in public education has been divided into six categories consisting of parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and community collaboration.

**Parent involvement in Mennonite school.** Old Order, as well as New Order, Mennonite school, exhibit a social atmosphere not usually seen in a public school setting. Mennonite schoolteachers may have only a handful of parents compared to students, as many families send several children to the same

community Mennonite school (Kraybill, 2001). Family involvement and the connection between school families plays a vital part in the Amish/Mennonite school setting. Parents, children, and teachers are connected outside the classroom in social events such as weddings, funerals, church, and other gatherings. Amish and Mennonite children develop strong connections with their classmates and teachers because of the close-knit setting, and Amish and Mennonite schools support the values taught at home (Johnson-Weiner, 2007). Connections to the community at large give a sense of security and belonging within their community at a very young age. Building a sense of community is part of the culture, as each member is embedded into the community. According to Johnson-Weiner (2007), a members' understanding of what it means to be an Older Order Mennonite helps shape the school's educational philosophy and reinforces the values of the community.

A case study (as cited in DeWalt & Troxell, 1989) conducted in a Pennsylvania one-room Old Order Mennonite school concluded that parental involvement is a key factor in the resistance to social change and is essential for the operation of the school. A parental survey within the case study found that parents have a stake in the school. Parents maintain the building, provide funds for the school, and visit during the school day. School learning carries over to a student's home life, and children learn by doing. This may include home skills and vocational training on the farm (DeWalt & Troxell, 1989). Additionally,

interactions with parents are commonplace due to the school's geographic location.

Karen Johnson-Weiner (2007) surveyed Old Order Amish and Mennonite communities in Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York, and found that it is an expectation that parents provide encouragement and support to the classroom teachers in order to allow the teacher to provide the best schooling. Many teachers in those communities noted they appreciated the interactions with parents and the supportive role as well as having parents involved to make their job easier. They also stressed good communication with parents (Johnson-Weiner, 2007). Johnson-Weiner argues that the school reflects a larger community as a whole and reinforces bonds between individual community members, neighbors, and churches. Additionally, Old Order schools attempt to create a framework that defines its social relationships and community norms in order to help maintain their religious beliefs and values. She goes on to explain that Old Order schools consider their decisions regarding pedagogy, curriculum, textbooks, assessments, parent and teacher and student interactions, and school design to reinforce community beliefs and preserve the social and cultural identity.

### **Sense of Community**

Families demonstrate influences in multiple ways that reflect community structure and process. The influences consist of events, values, norms, and community collective life. Isolation is rare, and boundaries are permeable, whether by media, community, or social institutions. Community organizations

are a descriptor of the context in which families live (Bowen, Mancini, & Martin, 2005). Social organization is how people in a community relate with each other, cooperate, and provide support. Additionally, social organization also includes norms, social controls to regulate behavior and interaction patterns, and networks that operate in a community (Bowen, Mancini, & Martin, 2005).

A sense of community refers to an individual's perspective regarding the group with which they belong or associate (Wiseman, Gonzales, & Salyer, 2004). Cronick (2002) explains four concepts of community. The first concept considered is the need for identity, cohesion, and solidarity within a group. The second element of a sense of community is the influence. Cronick continues to explain group members must have influence over group actions and decisions without which they may not be motivated to participate. However, cohesiveness is contingent on a group's ability to influence its members (Cronick, 2002). The third element of the sense of community is the integration and fulfillment of needs. The needs of the group should be reinforced in order for any member of the group to maintain a positive sense of togetherness as it is a primary function of a strong community (Cronick, 2002; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The fourth element of a sense of community is a shared emotional connection, which may be influenced by the history of the group (Cronick, 2002; McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

McMillan and Chavis (1986) argue that shared history is not a prerequisite for the success of a group, but rather, members must be able to identify with the

historical components of the group. The lack of identification and history may facilitate or inhibit the strength of the group as well as its members. Cronick (2002) explains the shared strength of a community is conditional upon several features. The first feature consists of the idea of contact. The more members of a group interact, the more likely they are to become close while experiencing a strong sense of community. The quality of interaction emphasizes that a communal bond is greater when members experience positive relationships. Closure of events or unclear group dynamics may result in tasks being left unresolved. However, the more important the shared event is for the members, the greater the community bond will be (Scully, 2019). A group's level of investment, which is a strong indicator of shared emotional connection, determines the importance of the community's history and current status to the member (Cronick, 2002; McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Culture, as defined by Schein (1985), is “a pattern of shared basic assumptions that a group has learned as it solved its problems of external adaptations and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems” (p.12). According to Edgar Schein (2010), an organization establishes three levels of culture: artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and basic underlying assumptions. The first level of culture, as identified by Schein, is artifacts. Artifacts include physical space, language, technology, style of dress in the organization, communication patterns, and rituals

and ceremonies. Schein explains artifacts may shape the way an individual may feel inside an organization in a physical manner or metaphorically. Schein goes on to address the artifact's level within an organization as an interesting level due to its being easy to see and feel, but harder to be able to reconstruct what it means. He explains this level alone does not connect members to the larger purpose of an organization (Schein, 2010).

Schein (2010) considers espoused beliefs and values as the second level of culture within an organization. Espoused beliefs and values seem to be embedded in formal communication. The values detailed in historical documents in an organization or a shared vision statement, mission statement, as well as any ideologies, ideals, goals, aspirations, and rationalizations detail the group's espoused beliefs and values. Schein (2010) believes this level of culture informs how an organization approaches problems and concerns. Organizations may reach a social validation to an approach that only occurs through some form of shared social experience (Schein, 2010).

Basic underlying assumptions is the third level of Schein's culture model. Schein (2010) describes this level of culture as the deepest level of culture, and one that requires focus and time to be able to uncover and understand. Assumptions are the norms that have been developed throughout an organization that informs thinking, feeling, and behaving (Schein, 2010). Organizations may focus efforts on the artifacts and espoused values and beliefs levels but disregard basic underlying assumptions. The assumptions become ingrained and, therefore,

play a role in the effect on the organizational culture. Assumptions influence practices on an organization's daily work. Schein (2010) encourages organizations to practice re-examining their basic assumptions.

**Sense of Community in Public School.** Many research efforts confirm the benefits of building a sense of community in schools (Scully, 2019). Students that attend schools with a strong sense of community are more likely to be academically motivated, to act ethically, develop social and emotional competencies, and to avoid behavior problems such as drug use and violence (Battistich, Schaps, Watson, Solomon, & Lewis, 1995). These benefits are often lasting, and researchers have found that the positive effects of various community programs for elementary schools continue through middle and high school (Hawkins, Catalano, Kosterman, Abbott, & Hill, 1999). Schools are able to determine the degree to which students feel a sense of community in school by asking students how much they agree or disagree with various statements as:

- My class is like a family
- Students in my class help one another learn
- I believe that I can talk to the teachers in this school about things that are bothering me

An annual survey may help assess a school's overall effectiveness and how well specific community-building efforts are working. Unfortunately, schools with a strong sense of community are rare. In fact, most schools that assess students' perceptions of community wind up with mediocre survey mean scores

(Fiore, 2016). Another concern is that low-income students and students of color usually report a lower sense of community in school than do affluent or white students. Additionally, several schools appear to be poorly able to provide a sense of community for students determined to need it most (Battistich et al., 1995).

However, research also suggests that schools can strengthen students' sense of community by adopting feasible, commonsense approaches. Four approaches may be of benefit (Battistich et al., 1995). The first approach consists of actively cultivating respectful, supportive relationships among students, teachers, and parents as supportive relationships help to build a sense of community. Supportive relationships help students from diverse backgrounds to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences with others in the classroom. Supportive relationships help parents that may feel vulnerable or uncomfortable to take active roles in the school and in their children's education. Another approach is to emphasize common goals and ideas. Additionally, schools with a strong sense of community stress the positive qualities needed to demonstrate good character and active citizenship, such as fairness, concern for others, and personal responsibility (Fiore, 2016). A third approach is being able to provide regular opportunities for service and cooperation. Students learn the skills of collaboration, develop wider and richer relationships, and experience the many satisfactions of contributing to the welfare of others. Lastly, providing developmentally appropriate opportunities and influence, such as having a say in establishing the agenda and climate for the classroom, is intrinsically satisfying

and helps prepare students for the complexities of citizenship in a democracy (Battistich et al., 1995).

**Sense of Community in Mennonite School.** Mennonite schools foster a sense of community in all areas of life. The community and school share core values and consider those as a high priority. The welfare of the community ranks higher than individual rights and choices (Johnson-Weiner, 2007). In Old Order schools, teachers are considered the authority inside the classroom; however, that authority is removed outside of the classroom setting. The teacher is considered as part of the whole community outside of the classroom (Johnson-Weiner, 2007).

The Ordnung, a set of written rules and regulations, governs Amish-Mennonite behavior and culture of the community and school. Each Mennonite community is autonomous and, therefore, is its own governing authority. This allows each community to maintain its own Ordnung. Many Mennonites refer to the Ordnung as disciplines or standards (Kraybill, 2001). Kraybill characterized the Ordnung as generating peace, love, contentment, equality, and unity, as well as creating a desire for togetherness and fellowship. Additionally, the purpose of the Ordnung attempts to strengthen family, work, school, and worship in order to ensure seclusion from the world (Kraybill, 2001).

A case study, (as cited by DeWalt & Troxell, 1989) conducted in a one-room Pennsylvania Old Order Mennonite school suggested that one-room schools are one of the most powerful socio-cultural instruments to socialize Mennonite children into cultural values and ethnic identity. These values and ethnic identity

maximize the group's economic independence and their resistance to mainstream lifestyle and values. The case study found that the Mennonite heritage permeates the school, and the school aids the community in resisting social change (DeWalt & Troxell, 1989). Additionally, the study found the school is an important source of interest for the community. In contrast, public school consolidation has served to make schools larger and possibly less focused on the community at large. However, interest in the school seems to enhance the role of the school in a community and serves to encourage the importance of education (DeWalt & Troxell, 1989). Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer (1998) argued that Old Order schools' patterns of interactions with other Old Order communities, as well as community size and economic stature, shape community values as well as the school's sense of itself and its place in the larger society.

### **Summary**

Parent involvement and a sense of community within a school are necessary for continued success in a child's academic career. Additionally, families gain an understanding of the academic rigor within their child's classroom. Students benefit from parent involvement and a sense of community as they experience a sense of belonging. Classroom teachers also benefit from involved parents and a sense of community by building and establishing partnerships, thus supporting student success.

The review of literature involving a sense of community and parent involvement in the public school setting revealed a deficiency of both areas.

Conversely, Amish and Old Order Mennonites embrace a sense of community and parent involvement as they share a collective identity and shared vision of community (Adkins, 2009; Eisenbise, 2009; Hannah, 2013; Roth, 2011). A sense of community in an Amish and Old Order Mennonite school ultimately binds teachers, parents, and students together and allows a focused academic life (DeWalt & Troxell, 1989).

The literature offered an overview of Amish and Old Order Mennonite's sense of community and parent involvement as well as that of public schools. This study sought to gain a deeper understanding of the two areas in Amish and Mennonite communities in order that educators in the public sector might better replicate practices and thus improve the learning atmosphere and student achievement.

Chapter Three includes the methodology for this study and describes the methods used to determine the selection of participants. Chapter Four will focus on the analysis of the data collection. Chapter Five will provide an overview and summary of the study, including educational implications and recommendations for further study.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This ethnographic qualitative study was conducted to provide a deeper understanding of the culture of parent involvement and a sense of community in Old Order Mennonite and Amish schools. Revealing key elements may assist educators in the public school setting. The multiple case study explored parent involvement practices as well as a sense of community in an Old Order Mennonite and an Amish school setting. The researcher also considered the impact of parent involvement as it relates to student achievement and a sense of community. This multiple case study examined two schools, one Old Order Mennonite school and one Amish school, regarding what parent involvement and a sense of community looked like in each school setting.

A qualitative methodology was utilized as the design of this study. In-depth, semi-structured interviews and observations were conducted to determine the degree of parent involvement and sense of community in an Old Order Mennonite and Amish school setting. The researcher developed the interview guide based on practices of parent involvement and a sense of community in an Old Order Mennonite and an Amish school setting that emerged from the review of the literature. This chapter includes a description of the participants and how they were selected as well as details of the research setting and design.

Additionally, the chapter details the process used in conducting the observations and interviews and a description of how the data were analyzed.

### **Participants**

The purpose of this qualitative ethnographic multiple case study was to investigate the integral role of the sense of community and parent involvement in Old Order Mennonite and Amish schools and the impact of these factors on education. The SAGE Handbook defines qualitative research as the study of things in their natural settings with the goal of interpreting and making sense of the information through the means of interviews, conversations, recordings, and notes to self (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The participants in this study included staff, parents and students from one Old Order Mennonite school and one Amish school setting in Missouri. Teachers and parents were selected because they could offer first-hand experience and knowledge of the components necessary to support a strong sense of community as well as parental involvement in the Amish and Mennonite settings. After determining the teacher participants, interviews were conducted using the teacher interview protocol (see Appendix A). During the teacher interviews, the names of parents who were willing to participate were obtained for additional interviews using the parent interview protocol (see Appendix B). The participants chosen met the guidelines for purposive sampling, as outlined by Creswell (2012).

The setting for the study was limited due to the qualitative nature of the

study and the cultural and religious expectations of the communities in which the interviews were conducted. Contact was made with the head of the Mennonite school through a mutual friend. A request was made by the researcher to the school board, asking for permission to conduct the study in a willing classroom. The head of the school granted permission for the researcher to conduct the case study. An initial screening was conducted to ensure willing participants for the study. The participants included consenting teacher (s) and student (s) within the school. This study also utilized criterion sampling to ensure appropriate participants were selected to determine factors of sense of community and parent involvement embedded in the setting (Creswell, 2012).

The participants in this ethnographic qualitative study represented teachers, students, and parents in an Old Order Mennonite school and an Amish school. A total of four teachers, two at each setting, and ten sets of parents, five at each setting, were interviewed. Interviews with teachers lasted three hours over the course of 10 days, five days at each setting. Parent interviews were conducted in “couples,” with each interview lasting an hour, for a total of 10 hours of parent interviews, five at each setting. Students were observed in the classroom setting over a period of five days at each setting. Each observation lasted seven hours for a total of 70 hours, 35 at each setting.

The researcher gained consent from the school board of the district to observe in the classroom and interview teachers as well as consent from teachers and parents. Each interviewee signed a consent form prior

to answering any interview questions. (See Appendix B). The school board, as well as the teacher, provided parental information in order to conduct parent interviews. One on one interviews were conducted with each participant to answer the research questions. Individual participant names were not used in this study. Interview questions, documentation, observation, and direct conversations comprise the research. Notes were taken regarding the context of the interview. Observations and documentation comprised the student data for the case study.

### **Selection/Sampling**

The researcher used a purposeful sampling strategy for this study in order to select individuals and sites. Merriam (1998) stated, “The criteria you establish for purposeful sampling directly reflects the purpose of the study and guide in the identification of information-rich cases” (p. 61). Criterion sampling is useful for quality assurance (Creswell, 2012). The researcher established two preliminary criteria the potential participants were required to meet to be considered for the study. The first initial criterion for selecting potential participants stated that the school had to be either an Old Order Mennonite or Amish school. Second, the school board of the district had to grant permission for access, observation, and interviews. Mennonite communities are distinctive from church to church. Due to the distinctiveness of each community, some communities are unwilling or reluctant to allow outsiders into the school. A screening procedure was conducted in order to screen participants in the selected school as to their willingness to participate in the study. The screening procedure consisted of asking all teachers

if they would be willing to participate and then seeking input from the school board and teachers about parents who would be representative of the community of an Old Order Mennonite school and an Amish school. Next, the researcher invited teachers and parents to participate in the interview and observation process. A total of 10 sets of parents, five at each setting, were interviewed. The researcher observed for five days from 8:00-3:00 at the Old Order Mennonite school and for five days from 8:00-3:00 at the Amish school, for a total of 70 hours, 35 hours at each setting. Participation in this study was voluntary. Each participant was informed they could choose not to answer any or all of the interview questions.

### **Research Procedure**

An Old Order Mennonite School and an Amish School in Missouri were chosen, and access to each school was granted by the school board. The teachers and students were observed in the classroom surroundings. Research procedures included both observations and interview questions. Interviews with teachers and observations of both teachers and students were conducted to gain insight into the Mennonite and Amish classrooms.

**Observations.** Observations took place in the classroom, on the playground, and around the school setting, observing teachers, students, and parents, to gain insight into the Mennonite and Amish classroom. Through the observation process, the researcher was observing behaviors and interactions that supported Epstein's spheres of influence noted in the literature review around

parent involvement and sense of community (see Appendix C). The researcher placed a tally mark each time one of Epstein's areas was observed. Additionally, notes were added to clarify and use during the triangulation of data between the observations and interviews. The observation period lasted for two weeks, during which conversations and observations were conducted during classroom instruction as well as recess and lunch. The researcher observed 35 hours at each setting, for a total of 70 hours of observations.

**Interviews.** The interview period lasted for two weeks, during which conversations and interviews of the teachers were documented. One on one interviews were conducted with each participant seeking to answer the research questions. Documentation of interviews included the date, time, conversation, and the activity or subject area. The researcher used an audio recording device to record responses. The researcher personally transcribed all interviews by listening to the recordings numerous times and paying particular attention to accuracy. This assisted the researcher in becoming extremely familiar with the data and thus determining themes that emerged. Next, member checking took place by providing participants a word-for-word transcript of each interview and an opportunity to change any thoughts or add to the thinking through follow-up and reflection. Through the interview process, the researcher was seeking evidence that supported Epstein's spheres of influence noted in the literature review around parent involvement and sense of community. Once the data were transcribed, the researcher analyzed the data, looking for emerging themes related to parent

involvement and a sense of community, using Epstein's spheres of influence as a guide. This multiple case study used thematic analysis method and an inductive approach to conceptualize the data gathered (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was used by examining data to uncover such things as social relationships and behaviors of the Amish and Mennonite groups. Coding was used to label themes that emerged from the data as well as to identify relationships among the coded themes. Once both observations and interviews were completed and coded, the researcher triangulated the data in order to tell the story of a sense of community and parent involvement in the two settings. Additionally, the researcher noted any differences between the Amish and Mennonite settings with regard to how parents were involved in the school and ways the sense of community penetrated into the school setting.

### **Research Design**

This study used qualitative analysis to examine the role of the sense of community and parent involvement in a Mennonite and Amish school and their impact on education. Interviews were conducted with each participant to answer the research questions. Observations were carried out in order for the researcher to gain a better understanding of the depth of the sense of community and level of parent involvement.

Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2009) identified the central focus of qualitative research as, "providing an understanding of a social setting or activity as viewed

from the perspective of the research participants” (p. 14). Creswell (2007)

describes qualitative research:

Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and complex description and interpretation of the problem as it extends the literature or signals a call for action. (p. 37)

In order to examine the sense of community and level of parent involvement in a Mennonite and Amish school, the researcher conducted interviews of each participant based on the theoretical underpinnings of Epstein’s spheres of influence and the themes that emerged from the literature review.

- Parent Involvement
  - Level of commitment
  - Parental activity and participation
- Sense of Community
  - Sense of belonging/identity
  - Influence

- Cohesion/solidarity

Creswell's (2007) data falls into four basic categories, "observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials" (p. 129). Due to the religious beliefs of the Amish and Old Order Mennonite communities, only audio documentation was allowed. Creswell (2007) also makes the suggestion of being flexible when creating research questions. He makes the assertion that participants in an interview will not necessarily answer the question being asked by the researcher and, in fact, may answer a question that is asked in another question later in the interview. Creswell believes that the researcher must construct questions in such a manner to keep participants focused on their responses to the questions. In addition, the researcher must be prepared with follow-up questions or prompts in order to ensure that they obtain optimal responses from participants.

### **Instrumentation**

This ethnographic qualitative study was conducted to provide a deeper understanding of the culture of parent involvement and a sense of community in Old Order Mennonite and Amish schools. Revealing key elements may assist educators in the public school setting. The multiple case study explored parent involvement practices as well as a sense of community. The interview questions for this case study were developed by the researcher based on themes that emerged through the review of related literature. Interview questions, documentation, observation, and direct conversations comprise the research. Notes were taken regarding the content of the interview. Observations,

documentation, and interviews comprised the student data for the case study. Privacy was protected by using numbers rather than names for all participants. All data were stored on a password-protected computer. The researcher created the interview guide based on Epstein's spheres of influence and the following themes that emerged from the literature review.

- Parent Involvement
  - Level of commitment
  - Parental activity and participation
- Sense of Community
  - Sense of belonging/identity
  - Influence
  - Cohesion/solidarity
- Epstein's sphere of influence
- Parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community

### **Data Analysis**

Stake (2005) referred to data analysis as making meaningful considerations while analyzing and synthesizing in order to make sense of the situation. Analyzing qualitative data requires that you spend time reading through various interview notes and transcriptions from beginning to end several times. Careful analysis allows for generating categories, themes, and patterns that emerge from the data. Strauss and Corbin (1998) make the case that any

researcher conducting a qualitative analysis must learn to code well, resulting in excellence of coding results in the quality of the research.

This ethnographic qualitative multiple case study examined the integral role of the sense of community and parent involvement in an Old Order Mennonite and an Amish school and their impact on education. Based on the themes obtained in the review of the literature, an interview protocol was created. (See Appendix A). This multiple case study used thematic analysis and an inductive and deductive approach to conceptualize the data gathered. Thematic analysis was used by analyzing data to uncover such things as social relationships and behaviors of the Amish and Mennonite groups. First, the researcher listened to the taped interview sessions numerous times and transcribed them word for word. Participants were provided the opportunity to read the transcriptions and suggest any corrections needed. Next, the researcher carefully analyzed and coded the data into similar categories using keywords and phrases. Themes then emerged from the related categories defined from the data. Next, observational data were coded for emerging themes. The researcher reviewed the three spheres of influence and compared the themes according to Epstein's spheres of influence. Next, the researcher grouped each theme by the appropriate sphere of influence. Finally, the researcher reviewed the data and determined the overall themes for each research question.

Open coding was used to label themes that emerged from the data as well as to identify relationships among the coded themes. Creswell (2007) notes that a

code can emerge from data that is not only expected, but also even surprising, unusual, or interesting. Additionally, the researcher used a process of memoing throughout the course of the data collection in order to record insights that could be analyzed for future reference. A copy of the purpose of the study, theoretical framework, and guided research questions were kept with the memoing notebook in order to help focus the coding field notes (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

Interviews were audio-recorded and listened to multiple times by the researcher to ascertain data. In order to increase a trustworthy research process, triangulation of interviews was conducted through member (participant) checking of interviewees (Creswell & Miller 2000; Merriam 1998). Participants were given interview transcripts collected during the interview session in order to verify for authenticity and accuracy. According to Creswell and Miller (2000), data should be continually revisited and scrutinized for accuracy. The researcher used field notes and memos from the interviews and observations to conduct the data analysis and crosscheck the findings for reliability. Data viewed through the lens of Old Order Mennonite and Amish schools was analyzed to determine the impact on education regarding parent involvement and sense of community, which included: (a) level of parent involvement, (b) parental activity and participation, (c) sense of community, (d) belonging/identity, (e) cohesion/solidarity, (f) parenting, (g) communicating. Evidence of these factors was demonstrated through elements of Epstein's spheres of influence such as volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and

collaborating with the community. These components formed the basis of the interview protocol.

Data were pre-coded by highlighting and underlining significant participant quotes or information found in the interviews and observations (Layder, 1998). Interview recordings were transcribed in order to identify patterns and themes. Data were then analyzed using open coding, looking for key-words, patterns, and phrases related to parent involvement and sense of community. Once the data was analyzed for key collection points, the researcher coded the data into related categories. Axial coding was used to relate categories into subcategories in order to critically analyze data (Charmaz, 2006). The researcher examined common themes found within the interview questions and observations and coded data by completing a content analysis.

### **Summary**

The goal of this study was to examine the sense of community and parent involvement in an Old Order Mennonite and an Amish school setting in order to investigate the integral role of sense of community and parent involvement present in Old Order Mennonite and Amish schools and the impact of these factors on education. Chapter Three contained a description of the methodology involved in the study. Chapter Four will offer an analysis of the data, and chapter Five will include conclusions and recommendations from the findings of the study.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **FINDINGS**

Chapter Four presents the results of this ethnographic qualitative multiple case study. The study explored the sense of community and parent involvement in an Old Order Mennonite and an Amish school setting in order to investigate the integral role sense of community and parent involvement present in Old Order Mennonite and Amish schools and the impact of these factors on education. This case study also considered the social relationships and behaviors of the Amish and Mennonite groups within their community setting and aspired to expand a deeper understanding of the culture of parent involvement and a sense of community in Old Order Mennonite and Amish schools. The study was viewed through the lens of 40 school participants. The researcher conducted interviews and made observations that constituted the data collection portion of the case study. The theoretical framework for this case study was based on the following components gleaned from the comprehensive review of literature: (a) level of parent involvement, (b) parental activity and participation, (c) sense of community, (d) belonging/identity, (e) cohesion/solidarity, (f) parenting, (g) communicating (Epstein, 2001).

This case study used thematic analysis and an inductive and deductive approach to conceptualize the data gathered. The researcher followed the strategies outlined in the previous chapter to select participants and to analyze and

interpret the data. Thematic analysis was used to uncover such things as social relationships and behaviors of the Amish and Mennonite groups. Open coding was used to label themes that emerged from the data as well as to identify relationships among the coded themes.

Chapter Four is organized by participants and setting, results of the data, and the overarching research questions that guided the study.

1. What can be learned from the Old Order Mennonite school and Amish school setting regarding parent involvement?
2. What can be learned from the Old Order Mennonite school and Amish school setting regarding a sense of community?
3. In what ways, if any, do the findings of this study relate to the public school setting?

### **Participants**

The participants for this study were selected due to their connection with an Old Order Mennonite or Amish school. The participants included staff and parents from one Old Order Mennonite school and one Amish school setting in Missouri. Teachers and parents were selected because they could offer first-hand experience and knowledge of the components necessary to support a strong sense of community as well as parental involvement in the Amish and Mennonite settings. The researcher gleaned recommended names of various parents that had students enrolled at the school and had exhibited parent involvement and a sense of community. Both the selection of the schools and the participants in the study

were chosen because they could purposefully help inform the researcher of an understanding of the research problem in order to determine factors of sense of community and parent involvement embedded in the setting (Creswell, 2012). Two staff members interviewed at the Old Order Mennonite school site included a Kindergarten through fourth-grade regular classroom teacher and a fifth-grade through eighth-grade regular classroom teacher. Additionally, five sets of parents of children at the Old Order Mennonite school were interviewed. Staff members interviewed at the Amish school site included a first-grade through fourth-grade regular classroom teacher as well as a fifth-grade through an eighth-grade regular classroom teacher. Students attend school through the eighth grade and then stop in order for students to begin working on the farm and at home. Five sets of parents were also interviewed at the Amish school site. All four teachers were female with Mennonite and Amish community upbringing. For the intentions of this study and to preserve confidentiality, the four teachers were identified as T1, T2, T3, and T4 as the researcher sorted data. Additionally, the 10 married parent participants were interviewed as couples but identified individually as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18, P19, P20 for the purpose of sorting the data. At each of the two sites, twelve different individuals were interviewed for the purpose of this case study. The researcher provided each participant with an interview protocol and a question guide. The researcher explained to each participant that the results of the study would be kept confidential and that their anonymity would be upheld by not identifying

participants. To uphold this commitment, the researcher assigned all participants a letter and number for data sorting, analysis, and reporting. Additionally, participants were informed that all transcribed documents would be securely locked in a vault for the educational research requirement of three years and then destroyed.

**Teacher Participants.** The researcher interviewed four teachers, two at each setting. Each teacher was in charge of one of two classrooms in the setting. Two teachers taught a classroom of kindergarten through fourth grade, and the other two taught a classroom of fifth through eighth grade. Student populations ranged from 14 to 19 per classroom.

Teacher training consisted of one week and was conducted by mentor teachers. The training took place in various settings, from local to broader, such as Pennsylvania and the Midwest, pending the teacher's religious community. Two of the teachers' trainings used an Old Order Mennonite curriculum and educational materials to instruct new teachers. Training consisted of learning the curriculum, as well as how to incorporate Bible lessons and scripture memorization. One teacher grew up in the same community and had 19 years of experience, including five years teaching in Ohio and stated, "The older teachers teach the curriculum to younger teachers during the training." One teacher stated, "I've always wanted to become a teacher from a young age, and I love teaching school." Another teacher explained, "I began teaching when the previous classroom teacher married and stepped down from the position." That teacher

works at the local bakery, helping make baked good for the public when school lets out in May. The teacher stated, “I enjoy working with other women in the bakery,” and explained she learned how to bake from her mother at a very young age baking for her younger siblings. One teacher stated, “I began teaching when the previous teacher moved away.” Additionally, another teacher stated, “I have several younger siblings and felt drawn to teaching because of the experience helping my siblings with schoolwork.”

**Parent Participants.** The researcher interviewed parents in couples with both parents present. Ten sets of parents were interviewed, five at each setting for a total of 20 parent interviews. Parents had children ranging from ages two to 25 years old, and anywhere from two to five children per family. One set of parents had two older children who were 17 and 19. The 17-year-old still lived at home and helped on the family farm. The 19-year-old was married and lived nearby in the same community. Another family had a 15-year-old in the family. This was the last year of school for the 15-year-old as schooling stops at the eighth grade. He will begin helping with work at home and on the family farm at the completion of eighth grade. The researcher noted this is older than a typical eighth-grader in a public school setting.

### **Assuring Trustworthiness**

This case study incorporated the key characteristics of a “good” qualitative study as outlined by Creswell (2007). Additionally, Creswell outlined key validation strategies to ensure trustworthiness in qualitative research. These

strategies included: (a) prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field; (b) triangulation, (c) peer reviews or debriefing, (d) clarifying researcher bias, (e) member checking, (f) rich, thick description, and (g) external audits. The following five strategies were used in this study: (a) prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field (b) triangulation, (c) clarifying researcher bias, (d) rich, thick description, and (e) member checking.

Prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field was accomplished by spending an appropriate amount of time with the participants observing in their own community in order to gain a better understanding of behavior, values, and relationships in a social context. Observations took place over a two week time period, one week at the Old Order Mennonite School and one week at the Amish School from 8-3:30 each day. At each school, the researcher had the opportunity to observe students in the classroom, on the playground, at lunch, and at recess. Interactions with students and teachers, as well as classmates, were observed before, during, and after school. Additionally, the researcher observed students playing in a softball game.

Triangulation of the data was achieved in a continuous manner beginning with interviews of teachers and parents and adding observational and archival data throughout the process. Additionally, the researcher engaged in confirmation from the participants regarding the accuracy of data collected and coding of emerging themes found in the interviews, observations, and curriculum documents as well as student journal and visitor log. These strategies were

incorporated to provide corroborating evidence from different sources to support the data and emerging themes (Creswell, 2007).

Clarifying researcher bias was completed by the researcher stating assumptions made at the beginning of the case study. The researcher's initial assumptions included (a) believing parent involvement and sense of community would be a worthy topic of study, (b) assuming the Old Order Mennonite and Amish School settings would provide insight into increased parent involvement and sense of community in public education, and (c) believing the findings from the study would benefit teachers and schools to increase parent involvement and create a sense of community within the public school setting. This process is included so that the reader will understand the researcher's position and any biases or assumptions that might affect the research (Merriam, 1998).

Rich, thick description was included in this study as the researcher detailed the selection of the participants, the design of the study, and how the data were collected and analyzed. Additionally, rich and thick description through observations allows the reader to make connections about transferability (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research analyzes the process, meaning, and understanding; therefore, it produces a product that is richly descriptive (Merriam, 1998).

### **Research Setting**

This multiple case study took place at an Old Order Mennonite school and an Amish school setting.

**Old Order Mennonite School Setting.** While observing in the Old Order Mennonite school, the researcher made sure to document the surroundings in and around the school. The school consisted of a two-room schoolhouse. One room was dedicated to the kindergarten through fourth-grade classroom, and the other room was occupied by the fifth through the eighth-grade classroom. Upon entering the school, there was a hallway with hooks for bags as well as a sink for washing hands. The researcher noted the hooks had a smaller hook on top for straw hats and bonnets. The lower grade classroom had several large windows in order to allow the sun to light the room. A stove could be seen in the corner of the room to be used in the winter months. Seats were in rows grouped by grade level. The alphabet could be seen on the front wall of the classroom in both English and German. World maps lined another wall along with various sized crosses. Near the back of the classroom was a library consisting of several worn books. Most of the books were religious fiction and nonfiction educational books, such as math workbooks. The last wall consisted of a health unit with a picture of the food pyramid.

The fourth through eighth-grade classroom connected to the lower grades through a hallway. Upon entering the upper-grade classroom, seats could be seen in rows according to grade level. Each desk had a handmade bag used for collecting trash throughout the day. Near the front of the classroom was a Missouri bulletin board displaying a map of the state with various facts about the state of Missouri. Another bulletin board display could be seen on the back wall

with a list of daily jobs. Artwork could be seen around the room. In the corner of the room was a stove used to warm the classroom in the winter months. The outside of the school contained a newly remodeled toilet area for boys and girls, along with a covered parking area for buggies. Additionally, an eating area could be seen with eight picnic tables. The researcher noted the ages of the students were between five and 14.

**Amish school setting.** While observing in the Amish school, the researcher made sure to document the surroundings in and around the school. The school building consisted of a two-room schoolhouse with the lower grades on one side of the building and the upper-grade classroom connected by a door. Outside were two outhouses and a small playground area. At the front of the school was a small area for bags, hats, and bonnets. In the kindergarten through fourth-grade classroom, desks were in straight rows grouped by grade level. Handmade butterflies could be seen hanging from the ceiling. A skylight opening could be seen in the ceiling of the classroom to allow more light in the classroom. The back wall was dedicated to various scriptures of the Bible. Just above the door was the alphabet in English and German. Pictures of flowers, food, and animals accompanied the alphabet with the corresponding letter. The fourth through eighth-grade classroom was connected by a door leading into each room.

Upon entering the fourth through eighth-grade classroom, seats could be seen in rows grouped by grade level. A large display was on the front wall with a

student-made alphabet in cursive. Another wall displayed student-made roses in a foil vase with the heading, “I am going to a city where the roses never fade.” In the corner of the room was a stove used for warming the room in the winter months. Additionally, a skylight was in the ceiling in the middle of the classroom to allow more light. The researcher noted the ages of the students were between five and 15 years of age. It was noted the 15 year-old was older than a typical eighth-grader in a public school setting.

### **Data Analysis**

According to Creswell (2007), data should be continually revisited and scrutinized for accuracy. Stake (2005) referred to data analysis as making meaningful considerations while analyzing and synthesizing in order to make sense of the situation. Analyzing qualitative data “requires that you read through all your interview notes and transcriptions from beginning to end several times. Only then can you realistically generate categories, themes, and patterns that emerge from the data” (Roberts & Hyatt, 2010, p. 172). The researcher coded themes with existing data as they emerged from the analysis.

The qualitative data for the teacher and parent interviews were analyzed in a continuous manner. Data from the interviews were recorded on the researcher’s iPhone and were transcribed verbatim by the researcher and organized for analysis using open coding. By transcribing the data personally, the researcher became extremely familiar with the data. The researcher evaluated transcripts while writing down notes and observations made, reread notes, and grouped

similar comments together while searching for emerging and recurring themes in the data. The researcher made sure to compare transcripts and observations in order to organize developing codes into emerging themes. The resulting emerging themes are presented below, according to each of the research questions. The researcher utilized the first level of data analysis as characterized by Creswell (2007) in order to determine the information to include and or exclude from the descriptive data account. The researcher utilized the second level of data analysis through open coding while constructing emerging themes and patterns of the data. Further analysis of the patterns and themes will be discussed in each research question.

During, and at the completion of the analysis of the data, the researcher carefully ensured the confidentiality of all participants. All teacher and parent participants were assigned a letter and number to ensure confidentiality. Attention was given regarding quotations from the participants to confirm anonymity.

**Research Question 1.** The following overarching research question guided this study: What can be learned from the Old Order Mennonite School and Amish School settings regarding parent involvement? The researcher asked open-ended questions (Appendix A), and observations were made according to the overarching research question. The interview questions were based on the following spheres of influence framework: (a) parent involvement, (b) parental activity and participation, (c) sense of community, (d) belonging/identity, (e)

cohesion/solidarity, (f) parenting, and (g) communicating (Epstein, 2001).

Findings from research question one are reported according to each of the seven spheres of framework.

*Parent involvement/ parental activity and participation.* According to the teacher participants in this study, parent involvement plays an important role in the education of the child. When observing in the classroom of the Old Order Mennonite school, both teachers shared a student-made welcome book for parents. Each student contributed to the welcome book. The book included a biography and self-portrait of each student in the class. The book began with a message to the visitor, welcoming them into the classroom along with a poem entitled, “At Day’s End.” The poem invited the reader to consider how productive the day had been and to thank God for the day’s events. Each page was dedicated to one student. Information could be found that included the student’s name, age, siblings, favorite things, dreams for the future, and a favorite Bible verse. Parents and visitors were encouraged to comment in the welcome book. Many parents and visitors had already signed the book, which indicated positive parent involvement. Comments such as “God Bless” and “Great work” could be read from the visitors. Several comments indicated other teachers had come to observe lessons as part of their teacher training.

When parent participants were asked for examples of school functions they have attended, many parents made mention of parent/teacher meetings, school-wide events such as holiday programs, luncheons, and building projects.

All participants expressed the importance of parental activity and participation. The themes identified for parent involvement included: (a) structure and order, (b) work ethic, (c) families (d) proximity to the school.

*Structure and order.* When asked what role parents play in the education of their children, all four teachers stated, “Parents and families instill the idea of a strong structure in the home and at school.” Additionally, when all parent participants were asked about examples of things they do at home and at school to support their child’s education, structure and order were evident. Many parents expressed the need for order and structure at home and at school in order to help educate children for work once a child completes their schooling. Several parents noted the children do not usually have homework after school (P2, P5, P5, P8, P17, P20). This is due to children helping on the farm after school and learning a solid work ethic.

All parents expressed that children help at home with chores. In both the Old Order Mennonite and Amish community, the older siblings help the younger siblings with all aspects of life, including schoolwork and personal care. A parent in the Old Order Mennonite community stated, “Parent involvement includes teaching and instilling an unwritten set of rules based on the Ordnung of the church” (P1). He stated, “The Ordnung is an unwritten set of rules in order to have structure and order in the community.” The set of rules are taught at a very young age. The Ordnung is taught in all aspects of life, including at school and at home. Teacher one also explained the children’s collective dress allows for

structure and order while following the unwritten rules of the Ordnung.

The importance of structure and order in the Old Order Mennonite and Amish school was present in their daily routines. This was evident in my observations of each classroom at both schools. While at each school, the researcher observed order and structure in the classroom. At both the Old Order Mennonite and Amish school, the day began with prayer and scripture reading. At both schools, the teacher read several verses from the Bible in a monotone voice with no inflection. While observing in the lower grades at the Old Order Mennonite school, the teacher had the students join her for reciting the Lord's Prayer. The researcher observed the students and teacher bowing their head while chanting the Lord's Prayer in a monotone, no inflection of voice. When asked about the monotone voice, teacher one stated, "Using inflection would put the focus on one's self when the focus needs to be on God's word."

Order and structure were still evident during math practice. The researcher observed the students seemed to know what to do when transitioning into various subjects due to instilled routines. While the lower grades were all in one room, the teacher divided the students into grades when working with each subject. Math practice began with fourth grade practicing multiplication on the blackboard in the front of the room. The teacher led the students step by step in multiplication problems. All other grades seemed to stay on task practicing math facts at their desks. While fourth grade finished their multiplication problems, first grade began their math practice. Second grade was next to practice math on

the board while third grade was last. Math lasted an hour, and all students stayed quiet and focused as the teacher worked with each grade level.

Reading began promptly after math practice. First grade knew to bring their reading books to the teacher's desk to begin reading aloud. The reading sounded much like the reciting of the Lord's Prayer. Students read aloud in a chanting, monotone type voice. Recess began right after reading practice, and students seemed excited about the break in schoolwork. Many students could be heard speaking in Pennsylvania Dutch during recess.

Structure and order were also evident when observing in the Amish school. The day began with scripture, reading, and prayer. As evident in the Old Order Mennonite school, the Amish teacher and students also recited scripture in a monotone, chanting type voice. When asked regarding the reading God's Word in a chanting voice, teacher three and four explained the teaching of "less of self and more of Thee." Teacher two stated, "We need to put God first in all aspects of life." "If a member of the community uses inflection when reading the Bible, they are putting the emphasis on one's self and not on God (T4)."

While observing in the fifth through eighth-grade Amish classroom, students demonstrated structure, order, and respect. Students sat in rows in boy/girl order according to their grade level. Each day, once scripture reading was complete, the class began working on English and grammar. Eighth grade stayed seated while teacher four stood in the front of the row of desks. English and grammar practice seemed to be rote work identifying adverbs and adjectives.

The teacher moved to work with fifth grade while the eighth graders continued English practice quietly in their seats. Fifth grade stood in the front of the room, reading a play about Missouri history. The teacher acted as the narrator while each student had a different role in the play. Students read the play in a monotone, chanting type voice. Once complete, students raised hands to answer the teacher's follow-up questions. The activity continued through each grade practicing reading in the front of the room.

Upon dismissal, students could be seen passing a trashcan to each desk, collecting trash from the day. Each desk had a handmade trash bag hooked onto the back. During the day, students were expected to collect any trash into their trash bags. This allowed for fewer distractions throughout the day. Students continued to pass the trash can and dump their contents into the trash. The ringing of the school bell signified the end of the day. The researcher observed the students continuing the structure and order even after leaving the school and walking home. Students could be seen walking with siblings heading home. The researcher noted the uniqueness of the Kindergarten programming in the Old Order Mennonite school. Those students attended school for one month in April to acclimate them for beginning first grade the following school year. The theme of structure and order could be seen in the home, school, and community aspects of the Old Order Mennonite and Amish setting.

***Families.*** When discussing ways parents are involved with their child's schooling, one teacher (T1) stated, "many of the students are siblings from a large

family which allows for more involvement.” Therefore, one set of parents may be involved in the schooling of several children. Within the Old Order Mennonite school, the teacher of grades 4 through 8 is the older sister to five students in the school (T2). She stated, “My siblings take direction from me at school as they are accustomed to my authority at home.” All four teachers commented that the one-room schoolhouse encourages a family unit among the students.

*Work Ethic.* Family chores help make the children understand the responsibility of contributing to the family and the community as a whole. According to several parent participants, parents teach their children how to be good workers at school and at home and how to live a life full of integrity, compassion, forgiveness, faith, and respect for others (P1, P3, P7, P12, P13, P15, P19). When asked to offer examples of things they do to support their child’s education, many parents discussed modeling and establishing a strong work ethic (P4, P6, P14, P16). Several parents noted the children do not usually have homework after school (P2, P5, P5, P8, P17, P20). One parent (P5) stated, “This is due to children helping on the farm after school and learning a solid work ethic.”

Teacher one (T1) expressed how the school helps prepare students for work at home. She stated, “Students and parents came together and built new bleachers for the ball field as well as remodeled the outdoor restrooms in order to support the community coming to various events at the school.” She went on to

say, “Many students take over the family farm when they have completed the eighth grade (T1).” Teacher one also exhibits a strong work ethic as she described how she helps with the family greenhouse business in the summer and after school. Teacher two also described how she works at the local bakery in the summer when school is out and helps with household chores after school each night. When interviewing parents and asking how important education was to them, all participants revealed the need for children to gain a good education at a young age in order to help prepare for life beyond school and in order to support the family and community. The theme of work ethic could be seen in the home, school, and community at each setting.

*Proximity to the School.* All teacher participants noted that parent involvement does not just take place in the school setting, but in all aspects of life due to the social relationship and close proximity with each other. Close proximity allows for social connectivity among parents and teachers and frequent interaction of students outside of school as well as connection of family-school interaction (P2, P7, P9). Amish and Old Order parents expressed the importance of the school being in close proximity to homes and farms as this allows children to walk to school while continuing to build bonds with their peers in the community (P1, P4, P6, P8, P11, P16, P18, P20). Teacher three (T3) stated, “Teaching in close proximity to children’s homes while incorporating outdoor activities allows children to feel a sense of home.” The researcher observed children walking home after school, due to the close proximity to the school.

Four parents expressed having the school near community homes and farms helps prevent exposure to possible questionable values (P10, P11, P14, P20). Teacher one stated, “the school is never locked after school hours.” She went on to say, “Many times, a parent or member of the community will come into the schoolhouse in the evening and write on the chalkboard stating lunch will be provided on a specific day.” Several of the women gather to make a special lunch for the entire school. Members of the community share the responsibility of making the meal for the whole school. When asked if any of the parents had any suggestions for how the school could be more involved with parents and families, parents felt the school was doing a good job of involving parents and notifying them of any concerns.

*Communicating.* All participants in this study noted the close proximity of the Old Order and Amish schools to homes and farms is crucial for communicating with the school and each other. Both schools offer one community-based phone located at the church for individuals to use for further communication (T1, T3). Due to the close proximity of the school to the children’s homes, most of the children would walk to school. Teacher two and four noted they would send notes home to parents to communicate any concerns. Both teachers have walked to parents’ homes to discuss a child’s behavior, sickness, or other relevant information needed to share with parents. The communication also allows for the growth of building strong bonds between the teachers and families within the community (T1).

When asked for examples of ways the school tries to involve parents and support family needs, two teachers noted the beginning of the year meetings with families (T1, T2). Teacher one stated, “Before school begins each year, families are encouraged and invited to come to the school to hear important information for the start of a new school year.” All teachers commented on parent and teacher conferences in October or November to discuss any questions or concerns with the child’s learning. Additionally, the Old Order Mennonite school conducts a Christmas program where parents and community are invited to come to the school to watch the program (T1). The school also asks parents to partake in an end of the year softball game. The entire community comes out for the end of year event. Usually, the parents play against the students in a competitive but friendly game (T1). One Amish schoolteacher (T4) spoke about an end of the year picnic. She stated, “Parents and families are invited to an end of the school year celebration, and families bring food for the entire school and partake in the family picnic.” The theme of communicating connected the three spheres of influence.

*Language.* While observing in the classroom and at recess, children could be heard speaking German to one another. Two children were overheard speaking another language before school started, and many students were speaking a foreign language during lunch and recess. Teacher one and teacher four explained the children speak Pennsylvania Dutch when not in class. Teacher one stated, “The language is a dialect.” Children at the Old Order Mennonite school are taught Pennsylvania Dutch on Tuesdays and Thursdays, while a

portion of each day is reserved for teaching the language dialect at the Amish school. The remainder of the day is taught using English. Both teachers commented that the language is spoken in the homes more than English and that the church services are conducted entirely in Pennsylvania Dutch dialect; however, most of the school day is taught using English, other than the specified times noted above.

**Research Question 2.** The second overarching research question that guided this study was: What can be learned from the Old Order Mennonite School and Amish school settings regarding a sense of community? The researcher asked open-ended questions (Appendix A), and observations were made according to the overarching research question. The interview questions were based on the following Epstein (2001) spheres of influence framework: (a) parent involvement, (b) parental activity and participation, (c) sense of community, (d) belonging/identity, (e) cohesion/solidarity, (f) parenting, (g) communicating (Epstein, 2001). Findings from research question two are reported according to each of the seven spheres of framework.

*Sense of community.* According to the participants in this study, maintaining a sense of community is a vital aspect of both the Old Order Mennonite and Amish School. One parent (T12), “Amish parents focus on teaching children life skills.” Additionally, building a community is evident when speaking with the teachers and parents in both schools. A few parents shared that the interaction with community members plays a crucial role in the Amish and

Old Order Mennonite community (P3, P4, P6, P14, P15). The following elements support Epstein's (2001) sphere of influence of the sense of community.

***Building strong bonds.*** When asked how the community shows their support for the school and learning, all teacher participants discussed the importance of interdependence within the community. Each family plays a role in supporting the school and community by instilling the importance of building strong bonds. Two teacher participants pointed out that the Old Order Mennonite community and the Amish community consist of the church and school. Teacher two stated, "The families and teachers in the school work closely together as they are part of one community" (T2). Additionally, teacher three (T3) stated, "That the community consists of the church and school. The school is considered our church school." This further allows for a shared vision and building strong bonds.

A sense of community is also evident in the classroom. While in the classroom, the researcher observed students helping other students with various schoolwork, and each grade seemed supportive of the other grades. During Bible time at the Old Order Mennonite school, grades 5 through 8 joined the lower grades for shared scripture reading and singing. The higher grades came into the lower grade classroom with songbooks in hand while lining the front of the classroom. The lower grades stood upon the direction of the teacher and stood in front of the older students. The older children called out a song number, and both teachers led the students in song. The researcher joined in the singing of two songs. Teacher one (T1) stated, "The students were excited to see and hear you

join in the singing.” After singing three hymns, the older grades went back to their classroom while grades 1 through 4 sat down to begin scripture reading.

Teacher one (T1) stated, “The students were excited for you to visit and were being on their best behavior while we had a visitor present at school.”

Several of the female students chose to come to school in a dress they would typically wear to church on Sundays. Many of the boys dressed up as well (T1). The theme of building strong bonds was connected through the three spheres of influence.

***Belonging.*** Old Order Mennonite and Amish children are able to develop close connections with other classmates due to the connection to the community in the classroom (T1, T3, T4). This allows for a sense of security and belonging at a very young age (T1, T4). Creating a sense of belonging was evident when observing at the Old Order Mennonite school. During recess, two female students invited the researcher to join them in a softball game. Several students accompanied the researcher to the ballfield while asking whether the researcher would like to be on the girl’s team. They explained the fifth-eighth grade boys and girls have a friendly competition going each day at recess. The girls expressed their desire to beat the boys in a game of softball. It was evident the students were exhibiting a willingness to help the researcher feel a sense of belonging in their community. Upon completion of the observations in the Old Order Mennonite school, the family of one student gave the researcher a loaf of bread

they had made the night before. The bread was wrapped in plastic and covered in a homemade dishcloth. The making and giving of the bread instilled the evidence of creating belonging in the community. The theme of belonging could be seen in each sphere of influence.

*Service Oriented.* While observing in the classrooms at each school, students were seen helping other students. In the Old Order Mennonite upper-grade classroom, two students were seen helping each other study grammar flashcards. While observing at the Amish school, a few of the older girls were seen helping the younger girls opening items in their lunchbox during lunch. Additionally, one student at the Old Order Mennonite school had a speech impediment. A few students helped her when speaking with the researcher by clarifying her words. While discussing community functions with parents, three parents noted helping others is fostered in the community by coming together to help others when in need (P11, P16, P20). Some examples of helping others included growing of crops and the building of barns and homes. All Old Order Mennonite and Amish participants expressed that the school environment is critical to the community values and relationships with students and families. According to the Amish parent participants, the school plays an important role in teaching students to help others, which strengthens the community factor. One parent stated (P9), “Children learn to interact with their peers while training a child in becoming part of a community.” Evidence of being service-oriented and helping others could be seen while observing in each classroom at both schools.

When discussing a sense of community, all teacher participants expressed the Old Order Mennonite and Amish school community teaches students to serve others as Christ did. The theme of serving others could be seen in the home, school, and community aspects in each setting.

***Humility.*** Several Old Order Mennonite and Amish participants noted humility as a core value among the community as humility fosters understanding (P3, P9, P10, P11, P12). Parent three (P3) explained the German word for humility is *demut*. While observing, the researcher noted humility was evident in the simplicity of the school, students, and families at both schools. Two parents explained humility was present in their distinctive clothing as a modest appearance symbolizes humility and loyalty to the community and their faith (P9, P10). One Amish parent used the German word *Gelassenheit* as a way to foster humility (P12). He stated, “Gelassenheit means yielding of oneself to a higher authority.” He went on to say, “Gelassenheit promotes the importance of calm spirit which fosters humility and respect for others in the community” (P12). One parent stated, “Humility focuses on the welfare of the community and is of utmost importance in the Old Order Mennonite and Amish community” (P11). The theme of humility could be seen in the school, home, and community in each setting.

**Research Question 3.** In what ways, if any, do the findings of this study relate to the public school setting?

The findings of this study relate to the public school setting in various aspects. The culture in the Old Order Mennonite and Amish school is embedded in the entire community. This may be difficult to replicate in a public setting, as once students leave school for the day, students and families go their separate ways to various extracurricular activities, including sports, music lessons, dance, gymnastics, swimming, etc. Some students and families attend church activities; however, they attend a variety of different churches. Events may overlap with a few classmates at some events, but not all classmates are together at all events outside of school, as they would be in the Mennonite and Amish communities. As a result, the daily lives of students and families that attend public schools are more segregated and compartmentalized. This is in deep contrast to the fully embedded communities in the Old Order Mennonite and Amish setting.

The culture of the Old Order Mennonite and Amish schools includes a focus on God and less of self. This is reflected in the reading of the Bible and scripture using no voice inflection. This aspect of the Old Order Mennonite and Amish school culture is in contrast to the public school setting where students are taught to use expression and voice inflections when reading or public speaking. The Old Order Mennonite and Amish school students are taught to complete tasks and help others without expecting a reward. They are taught that helping others reflects a humble heart. This aspect may contrast with public school as students are rewarded for effort and hard work. Public schools might incorporate more service-oriented projects through their character education programs, as well, in

order to be less focused on self and more on helping better the community as a whole. Lastly, though Amish and Old Order Mennonite schools have good parent participations through all eight grades, public school parent involvement declines beginning in middle school and high school (Jeynes, 2007; Wang et al., 2014; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). Additionally, research shows parent involvement at home and school appears to decrease from elementary to the high school level due to parents' perceptions that older children need greater autonomy to establish their own identify and foster responsibility (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2011; Crosnoe, 2005).

### **Summary**

The purpose of this ethnographic qualitative multiple case study was to investigate the integral role of sense of community and parent involvement present in Old Order Mennonite and Amish schools and the impact of these factors on education. Chapter Four presented an analysis of the data. It also included a description of the participants and observations in the classroom. The results of the study were gathered from analyzing the data from interviews with each participant and observations at the school as well as incorporating archival data from student journals and visitor logs at each location. The researcher analyzed the data and presented it according to each research question. Each theme identified in the study was supported using information gathered from the participants and observations in and around the two schools. The participants and observations provided valuable insight regarding their thoughts on what can be

learned from an Old Order Mennonite and Amish school setting that can lead to increased parent involvement and a sense of community in public education. The descriptive data resulting from the interviews and observations was used to answer the overarching research questions for this study. Chapter Five will include the conclusions and recommendations of the study.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

When families and schools, as well as the community, work together to support learning, children tend to succeed in school, stay in school longer, and like school more. Additionally, when schools work with families to build bonds that respond to their concerns and value their contributions, they are successful in maintaining connections that are aimed at improving student success (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). The sense of community and parent involvement in public education have been found to be associated with a child's academic performance (Hill & Craft, 2003). However, the purpose of this ethnographic qualitative multiple case study was to investigate the integral role of sense of community and parent involvement present in Old Order Mennonite and Amish schools and the impact of these factors on education.

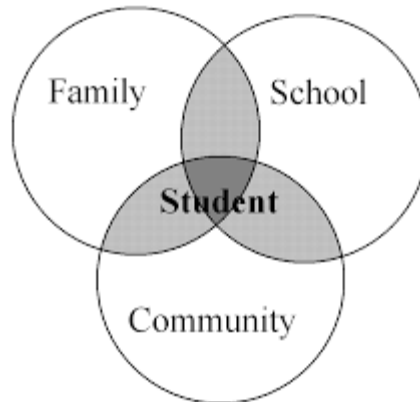
The following chapter provides a summary of the findings, analysis, implications of the study, and suggestions for future areas of research. This ethnographic study investigated the integral role of sense of community and parent involvement present in Old Order Mennonite and Amish schools and the impact of these factors on education. The study attempted to provide a deeper understanding of the culture of parent involvement and a sense of community in Old Order Mennonite and Amish schools. The revealing of key elements may assist educators in the public school setting. Researching community and parental

connections implemented in a variety of settings and cultures is imperative in order to create one's sense of belonging and to support students (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). One culture, which may be overlooked due to inaccessibility, is that of the Old Order Mennonite community and Amish community.

In comparison, Mennonite schools share a collective identity regarding a shared vision of community (Adkins, 2009; Eisenbise, 2009; Hannah, 2013; Roth, 2011). The sense of community in Mennonite schools binds teachers, parents, and students together in order to focus on academic achievement (DeWalt & Troxell, 1989). Examining the integral role of the sense of community and the relationship to parent involvement in an Old Order Mennonite school may assist public educators in fostering a greater sense of community and parent involvement.

The research was conducted at an Old Order Mennonite school and an Amish school in Missouri. The study utilized Epstein's (2001) spheres of influence as a theoretical background for understanding.

Figure 1 provides a representation of Epstein's spheres of influence.



*Figure 1.* The figure illustrates the theoretical framework utilized as the foundation of the qualitative case study (Epstein, 2001).

Each circle represents overlapping spheres with the child in the center of the spheres. Epstein (2001) developed a framework for defining and developing spheres of influence: (a) parent involvement, (b) parental activity and participation, (c) sense of community, (d) belonging/identity, (e) cohesion/solidarity, (f) parenting, (g) communicating (Epstein, 2001). The three main research questions guided the overarching directions of the study:

1. What can be learned from the Old Order Mennonite school and Amish school regarding parent involvement?
2. What can be learned from the Old Order Mennonite School and Amish school regarding a sense of community?
3. In what ways, if any, do the findings of this study relate to the public school setting?

The interview questions were based on the following spheres of influence framework: (a) parent involvement, (b) parental activity and participation, (c) sense of community, (d) belonging/identity, (e) cohesion/solidarity, (f) parenting, (g) communicating (Epstein, 2001)

This study analyzed an Old Order Mennonite school and an Amish school in Missouri. The study incorporated qualitative methodology using semi-structured interviews to gather the perceptions of the selected participants as well as observations and archival documents at each school site. Descriptive data were collected from the interviews, observations, and documents and were analyzed using thematic analysis. Themes emerged from the data to support and answer the research questions.

The overall results of the research included 10 themes that emerged from the data pertaining to each overarching research question. The following six themes emerged related to parent involvement: (a) structure and order (b) families (c) work ethic (d) proximity to school (e) communicating (f) language. The following four themes emerged pertaining to a sense of community: (a) building strong bonds (b) service-oriented (c) belonging (d) humility.

### **Limitations of the Study**

A noted limitation to this study was access to the Old Order Mennonite school and Amish school. Some Old Order Mennonite and Amish communities have excluded outsiders; however, contact was made, and access to schools was given. Although access to the schools had been granted, limitations were noted

regarding developing the necessary contacts and relationships between the researcher and the Mennonite community and participants. In addition, limitations of this study included participant and researcher bias within the scope of the study regarding parent involvement and sense of community. In this qualitative study, participant bias was a limitation due to the researcher relying on the expectation that the resulting data would reflect the truthfulness of the participants' responses. Each participant answered the questions according to his or her perceptions concerning parent involvement and sense of community in the respective schools. The researcher considered any recommendations made through the data collection and attempted to structure the interview protocol guide to allow the participants the opportunity to provide objective data pertaining to parent involvement and sense of community questions. In addition, the researcher triangulated the data from multiple participants as well as observations and archival data, before including it as an emerging theme.

The researcher was under the assumption that the participants would be able to offer knowledge and insight concerning how parents are involved in their children's schooling, as well as creating a sense of community in an Old Order Mennonite and Amish school. The researcher was not a member of the Old Order Mennonite or Amish community and had no affiliation with either community and, therefore, analyzed and interpreted the data through their own experiences and knowledge, minimizing researcher bias. Additionally, the researcher believed the culture of parent involvement and sense of community to be a worthy topic of

study and that the findings from the study would reveal key elements that might assist educators in the public school setting. The researcher clarified any biases at the onset of the study, and the credibility of this study was enhanced by incorporating (a) triangulation, (b) engaging in confirmation from the participants regarding the accuracy of data collected, and (c) rich, thick description. Limiting geographic locations to Missouri was also considered a limitation in the study.

The scope of this study was a limitation because the study focused on observing at two schools and conducting interviews with two Old Order Mennonite teachers and 10 parents (five married couples) as well as two Amish teachers and 10 parents (five married couples). Although the study was limited to two schools and twenty-four participants, a thorough review of the literature was conducted to identify research practices. Lastly, if this study were to be replicated, it might produce different results based on a different location and the Ordnung of that specific community. Although the results may vary slightly with a different group of participants, it would not diminish the perspectives of the participants in this study.

## **Conclusions**

The purpose of this ethnographic qualitative multiple case study was to investigate the integral role of sense of community and parent involvement present in Old Order Mennonite and Amish schools and the impact of these factors on education. These two areas are lacking in public education, and this study sought to fill the gap by learning from a setting strong in both areas, the

Amish and Old Order Mennonite schools, and searching for ways to apply that knowledge in the public setting.

Based on the analysis of data using teacher and parent interviews, student journal logs, visitor logs, as well as observations at each school, the researcher was able to draw meaningful connections and conclusions from data relevant to each research question. The two research questions guiding this study were addressed through the collection and analysis of the descriptive data. First, the data revealed how Old Order Mennonite and Amish families are involved with their children's schooling. Second, the data revealed how Old Order Mennonite and Amish families create a culture of community. Research questions were developed to guide the study, and an analysis of the findings of these questions is provided below.

**Research Question 1.** The first research question attempted to study parent involvement in an Old Order Mennonite and Amish setting. Six themes emerged from the analysis of the data. Initial research indicated the most significant type of involvement is what parents do at home. Creating a community of families, students, teachers, and school administrators provides additional support for children's learning (Sapungan & Sapungan, 2014). Additionally, the meaningful involvement of parents in a child's schooling can enhance the educational process (McNeal, 2014).

The researcher noted a component of parent involvement as structure and order that emerged as a major theme regarding parent involvement in an Old

Order Mennonite and Amish school setting. The researcher found the parent and teacher participants noted structure and order as a fundamental component of parent involvement. This was evident in the observations in the classrooms as well as in parent and teacher interviews. Additionally, established classroom routines supported this idea of structure.

Through the case study analysis, family involvement, and the connection between school families plays a vital part in the Amish and Old Order Mennonite school setting. Many participants noted Amish and Old Order Mennonite children develop strong connections with their classmates and teachers because of the close proximity, and Amish and Mennonite schools support the values taught at home. This aligned with the research that indicates schools that engage parents support students by developing beneficial parent relationships that affect the school, community, family, and the student (Ferlazzo & Hammond, 2009). Research showed students experience a greater extent of educational success when parent involvement is a priority. Additionally, students whose families are involved in their education typically receive higher grades, test scores, have better attendance, and demonstrate more positive attitudes and behaviors (Caplan, 2000).

These findings aligned with the research of Joyce Epstein as she explained an aspect of the overlapping spheres of influence is that schools and families share similar characteristics. She used the terms “school-like families” and “family-like schools” (Epstein, 2001, p.12). She explained the terms as ways to

understand the behaviors of families and schools that have an invested, mutual interest. Both the Amish and Mennonite schools demonstrated this mutual interest through their similarities in the values taught at both home and school, all of which tie to the church's teachings. The school and church are the community, the hub of all activities. They are not seen as separate entities. In general, public society tends to compartmentalize their lives into school, church, and home. If teachers and staff could blur the lines between the school and home and be more family and community-oriented, it might improve the school culture and, as a result, improve parent involvement and participation.

Additionally, it was noted that the parent events held in the Amish and Mennonite schools were more a blend of academic activities and those of a less "academic nature." School lunches, picnics on the grounds, and parent vs. student softball games are less threatening and more enjoyable ways to involve parents at school. As a result, nearly all parents attended all events. This finding aligned with the research that family involvement and the connection between school families plays a vital part in the Amish/Mennonite school setting. Parents, children, and teachers are connected outside the classroom in social events such as weddings, funerals, church, and other gatherings. Amish and Mennonite children develop strong connections with their classmates and teachers because of the close-knit setting and the fact that Amish and Mennonite schools support the values taught at home (Johnson-Weiner, 2007). This is comparable to public education sporting events. Parents feel comfortable attending those; however,

they may not attend parent-teacher conferences, which are more academic in nature. Possibly public schools need to incorporate more non-academic, less threatening events in order to involve parents and gain their trust. Additionally, this could build a positive rapport that would assist in times the focus needs to be on academics. These attributes may include individualizing attention to meet individual circumstances and creating reciprocal relationships between teachers, students, and their families, therefore benefiting the child (Epstein & Sanders, 2002).

The researcher again noted a differences from Epstein's spheres of influence in several areas. While public schools focus on achievement and notoriety, it is the belief of the Old Order Mennonite and Amish communities that they seek not to stand out in order to foster humility. Additionally, public schools may benefit from establishing more structure and order as well as creating family-like schools as research indicates students, families, and educators benefit when family involvement is increased as schools gain awareness and identify family strengths and, therefore, support student success (Caplan, 2000).

Proximity to the school was found to be a common thread throughout the interviews in response to question one. The findings of the analysis indicated parents and teachers feel the proximity of homes to the school allows for social connectivity among parents and teachers and frequent interaction of students outside of school as well as the connection of family-school communication. Additionally, interactions with parents were found to be commonplace due to the

school's geographic location.

This could apply to the public school setting regarding community schools versus public schools divided by grade level. Educators may benefit from researching community-based schools as a way for teachers, families, and students to attempt to create stronger parent involvement. Research indicates parental involvement in the public school setting should be of strong importance, as family engagement is critical to student achievement. Additionally, research has found a correlation that family involvement in schools reduces absenteeism and restores parents' confidence in their child's education (Garcia & Thornton, 2015).

Research also showed that the community/neighborhood school encompasses certain ideals, such as the school is a positive learning environment for all members of the community, community and school partnerships support the interest of the child and the broader interests of the community, schools are places of civic engagement, and members of the community are educational resources (Tanner & Lackney, 2006). If families were closer in proximity to their public community school, they might attend events more frequently and feel more a part of the community atmosphere than if they had to drive a distance to a public school divided by grade level.

**Research Question 2.** The second research question attempted to study the sense of community found in an Old Order Mennonite and Amish setting. The

researcher noted the sense of community could be seen woven throughout the Mennonite and Amish everyday life, and parent involvement and sense of community were embraced in all aspects of life. This aligned with the research that indicated Old Order Mennonite and Amish embrace the idea of community in all areas of life, including education and the classroom (Fishman, 1988; Hannah, 2013; Kraybill & Hurd, 2008). Research also showed that classroom instruction is based on cooperation with the community being the structure of learning (Fishman, 1988). Additionally, this aligned with the review of the literature regarding Amish and Old Order Mennonites embracing a sense of community and parent involvement as they share a collective identity and vision of community (Adkins, 2009; Eisenbise, 2009; Hannah, 2013; Roth, 2011). A sense of community in an Amish and Old Order Mennonite school ultimately binds teachers, parents, and students together and allows a focused academic life (DeWalt & Troxell, 1989).

Initial research had indicated building the sense of community was part of the culture as each member is embedded into the community (Johnson-Weiner, 2007). Additionally, according to Johnson-Weiner (2007), a members' understanding of what it means to be an Older Order Mennonite and Amish help to reinforce the values of the community. Building strong bonds, being service-oriented, a sense of belonging, as well as humility, were seen in the data analysis. Creating a sense of community was evident as families and teachers in each school worked closely together as part of one community. Parents and teachers

also indicated the school reflects a larger community as a whole and reinforces bonds between individual community members, neighbors, and churches. Additionally, Old Order Mennonite and Amish students were able to develop close connections with other classmates due to the connection to the community in the classroom. Close connection to the community aligned with research that suggested that schools can strengthen students' sense of community by adopting feasible, commonsense approaches (Battistich et al., 1995) by actively cultivating respectful, supportive relationships among students, teachers, and parents as supportive relationships.

Additionally, connection to the community aligned with the research that noted families that feel the sense of community within the school setting are shown to become more involved in their child's education and, therefore, have a greater understanding of what is being taught in the classroom and school system. Additionally, parents are more aware of their child's learning abilities as well as programs and services offered by the school (Caplan, 2000; Drake, 2000; Moorman, 2002). The participants explained that the school is part of a larger community that creates bonds with its members. Additionally, schools that build relationships with families that respond to their concerns are successful in sustaining connections aimed at improving student success (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). The results of the sense of community analysis support Epstein's (2001) research that indicates the experiences of the child, family, and communities have mutual interests and influences on the child. Experience and mutual interest

relates to public school as the sense of community in Old Order Mennonite and Amish schools bind teachers, parents, and students together in order to focus on academic achievement (DeWalt & Troxell, 1989). Therefore, character education, as it relates to building bonds and encouraging students to become service-oriented, while helping to create a sense of belonging and humility, may be an area public educators could increase their focus in order to help foster a sense of community.

**Research Question 3.** In what ways, if any, do the findings of this study relate to the public school setting?

The researcher gleaned additional findings through the observations and interviews regarding language acquisition. As students speak mostly Pennsylvania Dutch and German in the home and church, and English is woven in through their school lessons, students would be considered bi-lingual, or in some cases, tri-lingual. This would be an area that public education does not focus on in Kindergarten through eighth grade. Research states that students who learn a second language prior to age 12 are more likely to retain that language and have a greater ability to learn other languages (DeKeyser, 2013). Public education could learn from this by incorporating foreign language acquisition earlier in our educational process at the elementary level. Research states that the second most spoken language in the United States is Spanish, and the third is Mandarin Chinese (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). If elementary schools incorporated lessons in Spanish or Mandarin Chinese, this could make students more marketable in the

career setting as society is becoming more global in their efforts.

Another finding in this study that may relate to the public school sector is the idea of helping others. The Old Order Mennonite and Amish schools practice the concept of helping others in their daily routines, as reflected in the observations in the classroom with the older students helping the younger students. The act of helping others may be an area public schools could incorporate through reconsidering multi-age classrooms or possibly creating and fostering mentors and mentees, focusing on collaboration and teamwork, rather than high stakes testing. Additionally, this idea would lend itself to the theme of building strong bonds.

Humility, service-oriented, and helping others are themes identified in the Old Order Mennonite and Amish school setting that public schools may want to take a closer look at in order to adjust or capitalize on a character education program. Research indicates schools with a strong sense of community stress the development of qualities essential to good character and citizenship, such as fairness, concern for others, and personal responsibility (Fiore, 2016).

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

When considering future areas of research, one might consider building upon this study by observing college and career readiness focus. The public schools' focus is more on self, rather than the Amish and Old Order Mennonites' focus that is more on community. Another area of study could examine parochial schools and their similarities and differences to public education and what

educators could learn from each other in those settings. As teachers in this study noted that the school is a part of the church – a church school – possibly parochial schools would have this same culture and have ideas public educators could learn from. Additionally, one might consider studying the differences in parent involvement and sense of community in community schools versus public schools grouped by grade level as it related to this case study and the indications of the importance of the proximity to the school.

One main focus noted in the Old Order Mennonite and Amish schools was preparation for work on the farm after leaving school in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. This is comparable to public school's focus on college and career readiness. College and career readiness prepares students for academic work beyond high school, as well as preparing students for the knowledge and skills needed for a specific occupation. The researcher noted that public school is more invested in a focus on careers and individual success, taking students out into the world to make a difference, versus focusing on preparing students to remain in their local community and serving as a support to others. This would be an area public schools could utilize to link character education to college and career readiness, minimizing the focus on self and maximizing the idea that students could serve others and improve society as a whole.

### **Professional Implications**

The implications of this research study showed how public school leaders could create opportunities for increased parent involvement and a sense of

community in the public school setting. The first professional implication involves regarding language acquisition. The findings of the study indicated Old Order Mennonite and Amish schools embed foreign language in their daily life. Research states that students who learn a second language prior to age 12 are more likely to retain that language and have a greater ability to learn other languages (DeKeyser, 2013). Public education could learn from this by incorporating foreign language acquisition earlier in our educational process at the elementary level. Research states that the second most spoken language in the United States is Spanish, and the third is Mandarin Chinese (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). If elementary schools incorporated lessons in Spanish or Mandarin Chinese, this could make students more marketable in the career setting as society is becoming more global in their efforts.

The second professional implication relates to public school incorporating more non-academic, less threatening events in order to involve parents, gain their trust, and strengthen parent involvement while building community. Additionally, this could build a positive rapport that would assist in times the focus needs to be on academics. The data noted Old Order Mennonite and Amish school teachers, parents, and students participated in more of a blend of academic and non-academic activities, which contributed to creating reciprocal relationships between each member (Epstein, 2001).

A third professional implication that public schools can implement in order to create stronger bonds with teachers, students, and parents is fostering a

stronger character education program. Creating a character education program related to building bonds encourages students to become service-oriented while helping to create a sense of belonging and humility in order to foster a greater sense of community.

### **Summary**

In this study, the researcher attempted to investigate the role of parent involvement and sense of community in an Old Order Mennonite and Amish school. These two areas are lacking in public education, and this study sought to fill the gap by learning from a setting strong in both areas, the Amish and Old Order Mennonite schools, searching for ways to apply that knowledge in the public setting. Epstein's (2001) spheres of influence guided the research as she redefined the relationship between schools, families, and communities as one of the overlapping spheres of influence that share a concern about the success of the child in education. This research supported those findings in that the Amish and Mennonite communities overlap and embed all areas of life, school, church, home, and community. Through parent and teacher interviews, student journals, visitor logs as well as classroom observations, the researcher was able to uncover themes associated with parent involvement and sense of community. The findings revealed themes such as structure and order, families, strong work ethic, proximity to schools, communicating, and language helped foster parent involvement in an Old Order Mennonite and Amish school. Additionally, building strong bonds, being service-oriented, creating a sense of belonging, and

humility fostered a sense of community in an Old Order Mennonite and Amish school. It is the hope of the researcher that these themes could have a greater focus in the public school setting in order to benefit the school setting but also the students' own character and society as a whole.

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## **Appendix A Teacher Interview Protocol**

1. How many years have you been teaching? How many of those years have been in an Amish or Old Order Mennonite School?
2. What grade levels do you teach?
3. How did you come to teach at a Mennonite School? Have you always wanted to be a teacher?
4. What role do parents play in the education of their children?
5. Do parents assist their children with school? In what ways?
6. How do parents participate in the children's education? In what ways could they participate more?
7. How does the community show their support for the school and learning?
8. What can be learned from the Old Order Mennonite school and Amish school setting that can lead to increased parent involvement in public education?
9. What can be learned from the Old Order Mennonite school and Amish school setting that can lead to increased sense of community in public education?
10. How do you communicate with parents to encourage involvement?
11. Can you provide examples of ways the school tries to involve parents or support family needs?

## **Parent Interview Protocol**

1. How many children do you have currently attending school?
2. What grades are they in? What are their ages?
3. Do you attend school functions? If so, please provide examples of the school functions.
4. How important is education to you?
5. How is the school a part of the community functions?
6. What are some examples of things you do at home to support your child's education?
7. What are some examples of things you do at the school to support your child's education?
8. Do you have any suggestions for how the school could be more involved with parents and families?

## Appendix B Consent Form

Dear Teacher/Parent,

My name is Shannon Clark and I am a graduate student pursuing a doctoral degree at Southwest Baptist University. I am conducting a multiple case study and am gathering research and information to investigate the integral role of sense of community and parent involvement present in Old Order Mennonite and Amish schools and the impact of these factors on education. I would like to invite you to participate in the case study as I conduct one-on-one interviews to answer the research questions. Interview questions, documentation, observation and direct conversations will comprise the research.

The interview process will consist of interview questions and direct conversations. During the interview, I will ask each participant questions related to level of parent involvement and the sense of community at home and at school.

Your personal privacy is very important to me. All personal information will be protected by using numbers rather than names for all participants and all data will be stored on a password-protected computer. Your response to this letter will indicate your consent to participate and permission to use the information that you have provided in the study. This dissertational research will be reviewed and approved by the RRB Committee at Southwest Baptist University in Bolivar, Missouri.

Please feel free to contact me by phone at 417-664-0476 if you have any questions or concerns about the study or your participation in the study and interview process. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Shannon Clark

**Appendix C**  
**Observation Protocol**

<b>Parent Involvement</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Level of Commitment</li><li>• Parental Activity and Participation</li></ul>	
<b>Sense of Community</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sense of Belonging/Identity</li><li>• Influence</li><li>• Cohesion/Solidarity</li></ul>	
<b>Epstein's Spheres of Influence</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Parenting</li><li>• Communicating</li><li>• Volunteering</li><li>• Learning at home</li><li>• Decision-making</li><li>• Collaborating with the Community</li></ul>	