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A Country within a Country

Not much is known about the Amish people living directly in our midst, in the heart of our country. Wondering why the number of Amish schools has grown in number drastically, Dr. Mark DeWalt, a professor at the College of Education at Winthrop University, did an extensive study on Amish education. He traveled to Pennsylvania, Ohio, Iowa, and other neighboring states where the main population of Amish is, and sat in on their schools as part of his research. He also interviewed many Amish in the community surrounding those schools, trying to get a feel for their thought processes. His interesting findings were given at a presentation in Plowden Auditorium.

DeWalt reported that “the number of Amish schools in America in 1940 numbered 20....the number in 2005 was 1300” (DeWalt). The numbers are astounding. It is ironic because I would have thought the number would decline due to a rapidly changing America. Amish people, I thought, were a thing of the past, but DeWalt corrected this assumption. Why would so many Amish want their children to go their own schools instead of going to a possibly closer American public school which offers better technology, bus access, and a student body full of an enriching variety of cultures and opinions? This was the question at issue he explored.

DeWalt successfully answered this question by giving the audience major reasons why Amish parents insist on making their children go to Amish schools and the situation the Amish are in. For example, DeWalt pointed out that the curriculum and nature of information in the two school systems is different, with some American public schools teaching evolution and also putting emphasis on graduating. The Amish tolerate no talk of evolution and only stay in school until eighth grade. They have no need for diplomas and actually frown on individual achievements (DeWalt).

DeWalt's information makes sense as the Amish adults would not want the values of their children to come in conflict with the Bible, which DeWalt mentions is the governing source of the Amish (DeWalt). DeWalt reasoned that is why the Amish developed their own schools, to deal with having to offer an education but not wanting to do it the normal American public way (DeWalt). He said it was good for the Amish to be able to worship their way.

He only mentioned one religious reason why the Amish would not go to a public school, which was evolution. There are, however, many others, which he failed to mention. Marlow Ediger, a researcher for *Social Studies* magazine, *does* mention some of these reasons in her study of the Amish, and they including a disbelief in gossip, disbelief in disobedience, and a strict disbelief in technology (Social Studies 161). Had DeWalt mentioned such an array of things in a public school that the Amish do not approve of more thoroughly, his point would have been strengthened. His audience would have a feeling that the Amish could not possibly go to a public school had he mentioned so many things that would be found in those schools that would conflict with their religion.

DeWalt failed to mention consequences too. For example, evangelical Christians in the southern part of the United States may want to start their own schooling system, like the Amish, so that teachers can teach without being scared to mention God. Such precedents may lead to each group of people having their own schools and thus, we would not be uniform in our education, for the Amish students do not receive as complete an education as do most American public school children (DeWalt). Some academic areas would be left out and we also would be divided as Americans, each of us being schooled so differently and not seeing other cultures or perspectives. Another point of view that was overlooked would be the relation of Amish students to those who are home-schooled around America. Both of these groups are not directly involved with a public school. Perhaps there could be a curriculum like that which is followed in home-schooling, that has to be followed by the Amish also, but in a way that they approve of.

Another major point DeWalt brought up was the Amish are totally self-dependent. They grow their own food, make their own clothes, and walk or ride a horse where they need to go (DeWalt). They feel that eight years of schooling is enough to teach the students what they need to function effectively in the Amish world. (DeWalt). It is reasonable to assume this is why Amish feel no need for much more education as is offered in mainstream schools. When the Amish finish classroom schooling, they get trained in their special farming methods, their customs, and their own way of crafting by people of their community (DeWalt). This is not offered by American public schools and DeWalt's answer to the question at issue is proven with this.

His assumption that the Amish needed no American public schooling was supported by his evidence. DeWalt mentioned that even in the Great Depression, when food was scarce, the Amish were doing just fine. They have always made the best use of their land and produced great amounts of food. Their farming techniques are superior to any other method known right now (DeWalt). Presumably, the schooling they get allows them to achieve these results, so DeWalt justified his answer with this information. If the Amish have lived so well even in hard times, they apparently need no help or education that is not already included in their curriculum.

However, more information would be needed to justify this reason for Amish to stay out of public schools. For instance, have the Amish ever tried to talk with the American government to work out some sort of program where the public schools would offer programs in farming and crafting? The government might change some of their public school criteria if the Amish compromised as well. Moreover, some subjects such as science and current events require a broader exposure than can be provided in their limited curriculum. Since Amish children are American citizens, they deserve to have as thorough an education as do public school students.

It may have been the case, though, that DeWalt was aware of the fact that, as mentioned by Ediger, Amish people will not take money from the government for schools or anything else for that matter (Social Studies 161). Knowing that they could not take money would lead him to believe that

that is why the Amish did not even bother working with the government. Even if he knew, he should have told his audience that the Amish could not take government money. I was wondering why the government took no action to help build Amish schools, but it is because of this Amish belief.

Throughout DeWalt's entire presentation, I was wondering what the government thought about the Amish people. With many more Amish attending schools of their own, the American government would surely take an interest as to why. However DeWalt did not mention this vital point of view. It would have made his presentation much better had he had information such as this. A final critique of DeWalt is that he did well in giving historical evidence as to why the Amish have the customs that they do now, but he failed mention the importance of tradition in context, which an article in *Education* mentions is the most important thing to know about the Amish. It governs everything they do. They do not want to lose their way of life and thus do everything the same way their ancestors did it, including using buttons instead of zippers and buggies instead of cars. They do not want their children exposed to alternate viewpoints and ways of life. They do not like change at all (Education 339). DeWalt molded his presentation around the fact that Amish did have traditions and how they got there, but he never mentioned the importance of them, so we didn't get that very important context for his presentation.

DeWalt's presentation would have been strengthened had he included some areas like the point of view of the government, Amish refusing to take federal or state money, and more reasons why the Amish did not choose to go to public schools. DeWalt could have also given light as to the importance of tradition instead of just what those traditions were and where they came from. He may have left out alternatives due to his own lack of knowledge, or possibly because of the time constraints and his own impediments to seeing the issue. He needed to keep his audience in mind, though, for we have not studied the Amish people as closely as he has. He did answer the question sufficiently as he did give many reasons why the Amish are against American public schooling with

examples like religion and having no need for it, but as mentioned, he left out alternatives and consequences. His presentation could have much stronger had he included these things.

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