Abstract

In the 15th century, Hutterites in Europe had an excellent education system that was before its time by several hundred years. Because Hutterites are pacifists, they were persecuted for religious reasons throughout the 16th and 17th century. As a result, they were unable to continue being forerunners in education and the quality of their education declined. Upon migration to North America in 1874, they surrendered control of their education system to the public school systems. Today there is a revival in education among Hutterites. They are training their own teachers, becoming more involved in education, and are investing monetary and human resources into education. Issues facing Hutterian educators are the integration of culture and language into the school curriculum and connecting school life to home life.
Introduction

This paper will give an overview of the history and structure of the Hutterite education system, and the reasons why Hutterites and other minority cultural groups should become actively involved in their children’s education. It will evaluate the reasons behind the Hutterian drive for higher education in the 16th century, as well as its demise. The paper will also identify some past and present cultural issues concerning Hutterite education.

Background History

Hutterites are a group of persons who are members of the Anabaptist faith, a pacifist religion that originated during the Protestant Reformation of the early 1500's. Originating in Switzerland, Germany, the South Tyrol, and Moravia, the Hutterites are one of three surviving Anabaptist groups (the others being Mennonites and Old Order Amish).

Hutterites are named after Jacob Hutter, a Tyrolean pastor who first visited the Anabaptist communities of Moravia in 1529 and was subsequently elected as Elder in 1533. A decisive leader and a persuasive missionary, Hutter’s legacy was fearless leadership and astute organization. In 1536, by order of the Holy Roman Emperor, Hutter was condemned as a heretic and burned to death at the stake in front of “Das Gold’ne Dachl” in downtown Innsbruck, Austria (Hostetler, 1997). Religious persecution compelled the “brethren called Hutterites” in 1622 to migrate from Moravia to Hungary and Romania.

During the 18th century they moved first to the Ukraine and later to southern Russia, where they had been promised land for farming, and freedom from military
conscription. The decision of the Russian government in 1872 to enact a new military conscription law convinced all Hutterites and some Mennonites to leave for America. Because of the fear of being conscripted into military service during WWI the Hutterites made a subsequent move to Canada in 1918. Today there are approximately 110 Hutterite colonies in Manioba. (D. Maendel, Hutterite History teacher for the past 30 years. Jan. 2, 2006, personal communication).

History of Hutterite Education

Hutterites have a rich history concerning education. They started their own schools soon after their movement began, in the early 1500’s. They also began their own pre-schools in order to allow adults to participate more fully in community work and to provide children with a special upbringing and education that could not be matched in Europe during the 16th century (Gross, 1998).

It was an education system well-planned and researched for its time. For example, its school code stipulated that all children, male and female, were to be taught the art of reading and that physical activities were to be part of the school curriculum. Hutterite schools became so well known and respected that some nobility sent their children to attend Hutterian schools (Gross, 1998).

The points below outline a number of historic Hutterian contributions to education and are most likely the reasons why nobility sent their children to Hutterite schools for an education.

- The introduction of Kindergartens to Europe three centuries before Friedrich Froebel introduced them in Germany in 1837 (Hostetler, 1997). Hutterite children were cared for in their homes up until the age of 2 and after that they
were placed in daycare. The reasons for daycare were twofold: to free up the parents so that they could attend to their jobs and to ensure children were kept in the care of male and female individuals who had talents in keeping and training children (Gross, 1998).

- The provision of compulsory educational opportunities for girls as well as boys, two centuries before a similar practice was implemented under Maria Theresa in the Hapsburg Empire (Hostetler, 1997).

- The establishments of programs for adult education, two centuries before adult classes were established in England by William Singleton. This program was established to provide educational opportunities for adults who joined the colonies.

- The implementation of technical education which preceded the technical schools of today by four centuries. While in Europe, the main source of economic income was not agriculture as it is today. Hutterites specialized in trades such as mason, tanner, locksmith, clockmaker, blacksmith, plumber, wagon maker, potter, beer brewer, barber-surgeon and physician, just to name a few (Gross, 1998).

- The practices of hygienic principles of cleanliness and healthful living. School code instructed schoolmasters to separate children with contagious diseases from healthy ones; adults who cared for and examined children with possible diseases were to wash and dry their hands (Gross, 1998). This basic understanding of pathogens and how they spread preceded Louis Pasteur’s ability to understand and establish the basic rules of sterilization in the 19th century.
The above are documented in the *Hutterian Schulordnungen* (school regulations) of Hutterite schools of the early 16th century – a time when these principles were not generally accepted by the general population of Europe (Hostetler, 1997).

This does not imply a belief in education for the sake of education. Rather, these accomplishments resulted from deep religious devotion and a vision of education as a means of imparting the spiritual truths that are an integral part of every person’s heritage. School was a vital component of the community, not at all separate from it, and seen as particularly important for ensuring the survival of the Hutterian way of life for future generations.

**Education in Decline**

These high standards in education were maintained among the Hutterites for several centuries as they prospered economically and spiritually. However, all the wars being fought in Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries, combined with the fact that Hutterites were conscientious objectors, caused them many economic and social hardships (Gross, 1998). Because of their refusal to take up arms, they were often banished from their lands by lords and driven out of countries by the nobility.

This upheaval and chaos caused Hutterites to make the switch from being leaders in fields such as education to become preoccupied with the struggle for religious, economic and physical survival (Hofer, 1988). It is not difficult to understand why the Hutterian education system floundered and became virtually nonexistent. Education became such a low priority that just before the Hutterites immigrated to North America in 1874 their illiteracy rate has been estimated by researchers to have been as high 60% among adults (J. Kleinsasser, present Elder of the Hutterian Brethren, Schmiedeleut, Nov. 12, 2004, personal communication).
North America
Since their arrival in North America, Hutterites have placed the responsibilities of educating their children on the shoulders of the public school districts, which hired teachers from outside the Hutterite community. Outside teachers were hired because colony members did not have adequate English language skills, nor the formal qualifications (certification) to teach their own children.

This arrangement was expected to be a temporary solution. Soon after their arrival in South Dakota, some members of the community were sent for teacher training in Parkston, South Dakota. These members completed the training with difficulty because of their lack of fluency in the English language. They continued to struggle with the language barrier when they returned to teach in the community schools.

This struggle with the new language and curriculum continued to pose such barriers that it was decided by the brotherhood of the communities to discontinue the training of English teachers and to hire teachers from outside the community to teach core curriculum areas (Hutterian Elder J. Kleinsasser, Nov. 12, 2004, personal communication). Thus, teachers who had little understanding of their Hutterian students’ cultural, linguistic, and historical background replaced the colony’s traditional school masters who were now required to teach German language instruction and religious class only for the next 100 years.

Affects of Lack of Community Input
At first, this arrangement worked fairly well because the teachers from the outside had good rapport with the community and served the community well. However, as the years passed, Hutterites become over-confident in the abilities of the outside teachers and
become more removed from their children’s classrooms. The relationship between parents, students and teacher become more isolated.

There was not enough evaluation of the teachers found teaching in Hutterite schools by the community. This led to the degradation of the quality of teachers, then a downward spiraling of the students’ level of education and the relationship between the students and teachers. Swisher and Tippeconnic (1999) found that the teacher to student relationship is the most basic interaction that takes place in a school. To ensure that the relationship is mutually respectful and caring is essential to educational success. They also advocate that a good teacher is a good teacher, but when the teacher and the student are from the same cultural background, that relationship is enhanced.

During the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, Hutterite leaders realized they had to take a more involved role in their education system. This was unusual; since Hutterites migrated to North America in 1874, they had given control of their education to the public school system. In the late 1980’s, Hutterites became increasingly concerned over the fact that most of the teachers teaching in Hutterian schools were non-Hutterites. When Hutterite elders and parents visited their schools, they noticed little or no connections to the students’ daily Hutterian life outside of the classroom.

They did not find what Cummins (1989) would describe as an empowerment model. The characteristics of this model reflect the extent to which a minority culture such as Hutterites would see their language and culture being integrated into the school curriculum. It also stresses community participation as integral to the students’ education, as well as pedagogy that promotes students to use their own language. Cummin’s model also expects professionals who assess students to become advocates for the students, instead of legitimizing the location of the problem as being the students.
They also did not find cultural continuity as described by Sleeter and Grant (2003). These researchers found that discontinuities between two different sets of cultural practices can be confusing. They parallel the situation to when one travels to a foreign country that is very different culturally from one’s native country. One flounders with knowing what to do and say. Confusion, uncertainty, fear, and annoyance are common feelings in such a situation. Eventually one learns to cope with the unfamiliar world, but until that time comes, it is a high stress and low confidence situation. The same is true for children whose home culture is different from that of the school (Sleeter & Grant, 2003). This situation is especially relevant and pertinent to Hutterite children who must move between two cultures, home and school, as often as six times a day!

The need for higher education to survive economically was also a factor that put the wheels in motion and forced Hutterites to the realization that they needed both for the good of the community: more formal education and a more active role in obtaining that education. Traditionally, Hutterites have always had members who were self-trained, with no formal education or certification, in the vocational trades such as electrician, carpenter, plumber, blacksmith and plumber. Recently, Manitoba Hydro and the Labor Board made it mandatory that Hutterites seek certification in some of these trades or they would be forced to hire certified contractors from outside the colony.

When colony members went to attend vocational schools to pursue certification, it was noted that even if they had the required practical knowledge, they struggled with the theory. Those community members who had completed high school, or even a few high school courses, found it much easier to complete the theoretical components of the courses required for certification.
Manufacturing is also an area where many Hutterite colonies have ventured into recently. This is another area where they noticed that their limited academics were limiting the productivity of their business. Several initiatives were begun. Hutterites began training their own teachers and encourage or even mandate the completion of secondary education. They also began investing monetary and human resources into education on the colony. In a few decades, Hutterites moved from having almost no voice or say in their children’s education to taking a much more proactive role.

Revitalization of Hutterian Education

With the inception of Brandon University Hutterian Education Program (BUHEP) in 1994, education for Hutterites changed; today there are many more Hutterite teachers in Hutterite classrooms. In the first 75 years of the Hutterites’ stay here in Manitoba, only six Hutterites acquired teacher certification. Thus, up till 1994, less than 3 percent of the teachers in our schools were certified and Hutterites. Today, there are over forty individuals that have graduated from BUHEP with a Bachelor in Education, with over twenty more still in training. These forty graduates now have significant input for working in partnership with non-Hutterite educators, school divisions, and the Department of Education in providing the best education for Hutterite children.

Extending and renovating older school buildings, as well as building new schools, is a common occurrence on Hutterite colonies in the last fifteen to twenty years. When visitors and educators come to visit or tour a colony they often ask: “Where is the school?”

When the school is pointed out to them or when they actually visit the school, the generic response is, “I thought you had a one room school!”
The misconceptions continue when the visitors enter the school building. When one Hutterite school hosted a divisional administrators’ meeting several years ago, the administrators could not get over the generous size of rooms. They also expressed surprise at the educational and multimedia resources that were available to enhance instruction and to accommodate diversity in learning styles.

“Why all these changes?” people from outside the community ask.. “Why have Hutterites suddenly begun to seek higher education?” and “Isn’t it unusual that you attend university?” are common questions.

The answer is simple. The current (or for some, the past) education system on most colonies was not fulfilling its purpose. Hutterites were losing vital parts of their culture, such as their mother tongue, their uniqueness and identity. In short, they were becoming ashamed to be known as Hutterites and were beginning to think of themselves as inferior because they were Hutterites.

It is essential that students receive strong messages from their educators that their home language and culture are valued (Shields, 2003). Rules that forbade Hutterite students from speaking their mother tongue during school hours, recess included, is evidence that this was not happening. These rules and consequences do not agree with what research is saying about heritage languages. Cummins and Swain (1986) found that if students are allowed to use both languages, home and instructional, when discussing school work, the level of cognitive processing is increased dramatically.

In reality, it was only after the drive for higher education had begun that Hutterites, once again as in the 15th century, truly realized the power of higher education as a means of imparting and validating the values of their culture and mother tongue to their children. This heightened drive for higher education has raised issues such as
cultural awareness, i.e. respect and tolerance for diversity and the value of a trilingual background.

Language

Hutterites’ mother tongue is a Carinthian dialect of German and is the language of communication for almost all Hutterites. Children do not learn to speak English or formal German until the age of five when they start attending school. It can be very frustrating for teachers who speak only English to try and to communicate with students when they enter kindergarten, however; it is these early patterns of communication and language development that have the greatest impact on these young learners (Shields, 2003).

There are those that argue that knowing or learning more than one language will have a negative effect on cognitive development because individuals will become confused when they must learn to remember two labels instead of one for each concept presented. Other researchers argue that such experiences will only enhance cognitive growth in individuals and that they will be better able to detect linguistic ambiguities than unilingual individuals (Cummins & Swain, 1986). According to Sleeter and Grant (2003) all bilingual education programs that model the language and culture a child learns at home can promote normal and healthy psychological development and communication competence. They go on to explain that if a school denigrates a child’s native language, this may not only damage the child’s self-concept, but will also impair communication between the child and its parents.

In his experience as a colony school administrator, the writer can recall how a non-Hutterite teacher trying to get kindergarten students to find pictures of an “egg” in magazines was unable to communicate this simple request to the students. After several
minutes, both the teacher and the students became frustrated and the teacher made the
decision to go ask the Hutterite classroom teacher across the hall for a translation. Upon
hearing the translation, the kindergarten students’ expressions immediately expressed
understanding and pictures of eggs were produced in short order.

This exemplifies the need for educators who understand the needs of their
students and their own limitations in communicating with English as a second language
(ESL) students. A less understanding educator would have diagnosed the problem as
being the students and their unwillingness to learn and possibly imposed discipline
measures on the students.

Culture

Culture is often defined “as the way we do things around here”. Others have
described it as “keeping the herd moving in westward direction” or as a philosophy
“created and sustained by social processes, images, symbols, and ritual” as cited by
(Shields 2003, p.25). Sergiovanni (2000) defines culture as the normative glue made up
of a set of common understandings that binds schools and communities. With shared
visions, values, and beliefs at its heart, culture provides norms that govern the way
individuals interact with each other within organizations. If classrooms or schools do not
reflect the beliefs, values and traditions of all the students who attend the school, then
dominant culture will be reflected and the culture of minority groups will be excluded
(Shields, 2003). Even though Hutterite students make up the majority, or rather, all, of
the students attending their schools, this fact is not evident at all when visiting most
Hutterite schools.

The material being taught and displayed does not reflect their historical heritage,
or their Hutterian background. As an example, Hutterite educators are often amazed at
how non-Hutterite professional educators tend to stereotype all early years students by assuming that they would be thrilled to learn about dinosaurs. Most Hutterites do not have televisions or VCRs in their homes, and their children also speak little or no English until they enter kindergarten. When these children enter school they usually have no previous knowledge about dinosaurs; it is a totally foreign concept to them. With such a student background in mind, why would a professional educator consider a major thematic unit on dinosaurs as a highly interesting and valid topic of study that reflects and includes the background culture of the students? Yet, for too many professional educators, considering the particular needs of Hutterian children in light of their background is not a priority.

Next Steps

Like most teacher programs, BUHEP has done little to prepare Hutterian teachers on how to include relevant cultural content within instruction. This is especially true considering that most of their instruction/training came from mainstream educators. For example, as an education student while enrolled in an English literature course, my instructor realized that there was very little children’s literature with Hutterian content available to Hutterite children.

To address that deficiency, one of the assignments required each under-graduate to write and illustrate a children’s book. Some of the BUHEP students who had come from schools where their culture and language had been valued did quite well, including Hutterian content in their stories and pictures. However, many students did not do well at all. Some managed to write an interesting and relevant story about Hutterite life, but their pictorial representations of the Hutterite children portrayed mainstream society, not Hutterite society! And this discrepancy was not even noted by the author until it was
pointed out by other Hutterites. Other students found the concept of writing from the Hutterian perspective so new and unusual that they could only create stilted stories not much more interesting and personal than the banal “Dick and Jane type” stories about Hutterites by non-Hutterites! Thus, even many new BUHEP teachers do not have an adequate understanding of the importance of connecting school life to the life of the student, nor the expertise to implement culturally enhanced curricula.

However, things are changing rapidly and Hutterite teachers need to be cognizant of their responsibility to educate their students in such a way that they learn to cherish and value their unique Hutterian life style. Teachers teaching in Hutterian schools, Hutterite and non-Hutterite, need to enroll in classes designed to help them understand and instruct students that are trilingual and culturally diverse.

Because colony schools generally have enrolments between 20 to 35 students, the staff is small, thus limiting collaboration. This hurdle can be overcome when colony schools within one school division or even among various divisions can meet on a regular basis to discuss pedagogy, assessment, curriculum, and cultural issues, i.e., how to be sensitive to the language and cultural needs of their Hutterian communities (Shields, 2003). This dialogue between teachers can make educators on colonies more aware of the needs of their communities, and help them understand that there are substantial differences between what is common and acceptable practice from one Hutterite colony to another.

In short, the educators in Hutterian schools, whether they realize it or not, have a lot of power; with that power they have the potential to empower or disable children. In order to use their power diligently and efficiently, educators need to understand and know their community and school. They should be able to describe its elements: individual,
Hutterite Education: Growing Pains

structural, cultural and political. Hoy & Miskel (2001) state that “the greater the degree of congruence among the elements of the system, the more effective the system” (p.29). The more an individual’s work needs are paralleled with the expectations of the bureaucratic structure, the more harmonization and job satisfaction will result. On the flipside, the more power relations conflict with the individual’s work needs, the bigger the discrepancy between the actual and expected outcomes (Hoy & Miskel, 2001). If Hutterian educators do not include their community’s needs and way of life in their discussions the community will be “disabled or disempowered by schools in very much the same way that their communities are disempowered by the interactions with societal institutions” (Cummins, 1989, p.23).

This does not mean that Hutterian educators are to focus only on the Hutterian lifestyle in school. Such a narrow focus results in uninformed, arrogant, and ultimately bigoted citizens. Hutterite students, like any other citizens, need to be taught appreciation and respect for the multicultural dimensions of society. They need to explore and share experiences with others from diverse backgrounds in order for them to live successfully as Hutterites, and as fully contributing citizens of a broader world community.

That said, every topic discussed in school should begin from the Hutterite perspective. The students are Hutterites, and whatever curriculum is being addressed should be linked back to this reality. If student learning is interconnected between the classroom and the outside world, it will deepen and broaden their understanding and acceptance of themselves, others, and the world. This concept of ongoing connection between the students’ home and community life holds true for any minority group (Shields, 2003).
Conclusion

In conclusion then, Hutterites have a historically rich history in education and more recently, a not-so-rich history. They have experienced both ends of the spectrum: effective and non-effective education. It is, however, important to note that currently Hutterites have the opportunity to make great strides in education.

This enhancement and effectiveness will prove possible if Hutterian educators approach education as Hutterites approach their main economic occupations: agriculture and manufacturing. When it comes to these occupations, Hutterites are very informed on the most current practices and technology. There is ongoing reflection and discussion on how to farm more effectively, how to increase the productivity of their livestock operations, and how to improve manufacturing practices.

As described in this excerpt from the poem “Mending Wall” (1915) by Robert Frost, there are very few “fences” erected when accepting the technology and practices of the outside world, when it comes to economics.

He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."

Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder

If I could put a notion in his head:

"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it

Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know

What I was walling in or walling out,

And to whom I was like to give offense.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,

That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."

It is sad to note that there still are some fences when it comes to accepting higher education on Hutterite colonies, even among Hutterite educators. When educational change is being implemented, how often do Hutterite educators hide behind the ideas of the past? Instead of making excuses for ourselves by stating or accepting statements such as, “That is the way we have done it in the past”, or “That is what the minister would say or do,” or “My colony would never let me do this,” it would be far wiser to use our acquired professional knowledge to communicate our ideas and pedagogy to the community we teach in. Hutterian schools need to become places where young people, educators, and community members explore deep understandings of culture and learn to recognize and celebrate diversity in language and culture. Students should not have to choose between “them” and “us”, school life or home life, nor between the Hutterian community and the “outside world” (as the community outside the colony is often referred to). Hutterite students need to learn to see themselves as part of the world community, in some ways distinct and different, and in other ways as very similar to and
part of all humanity. We must, as Shields (2003) suggests, “go underneath, behind, and beyond the sayings of our fathers, our culture, our society, and move out of the darkness” (p.324). Good intentions are not enough. Good intentions need to be put into action and only then will we meet the future in an increasingly fulfilling and meaningful way.
References


