

Teaching That Transforms

Why Anabaptist-Mennonite Education Matters

by John D. Roth

Study Guide written by Dale Shenk, Bethany Christian Schools, Goshen, Indiana.

These questions are intended to expand and deepen appreciation for Roth's book. Although page numbers are not provided in most cases, the questions are given in the approximate sequence that the themes occur in the chapters.

See also [Teaching That Transforms](#) in the online catalog.

Introduction

1. Personal context

- Who have been important teachers in your lives? Why?
- What are your experiences with Mennonite education? What were the strengths and weaknesses?
- What are your perceptions of Mennonite schools? Where did you get your information?

2. Mennonite schools context

- On page 20, Roth describes the Mennonite Church as a denomination with decreasing loyalty to church institutions, declining congregational membership, and ambivalence regarding Anabaptist distinctives. Do you see this as accurate? What is the evidence for or against these comments?
- Roth suggests that schools are beginning to reach out more to non-Mennonite members of the community. How have you seen this begin to happen?

3. Core values

- On page 21 (in point number four), Roth lists a series of questions related to core values for Mennonite schools. Consider those questions carefully and discuss your answers.
- What is an *incarnational* theology? How is this different from other options?
- Is there such a thing as a uniquely Anabaptist pedagogy?
- What kinds of expectations do you have for Mennonite schools?

Chapter 1: *The Context of Mennonite Education in North America*

1. Context

- Tell stories of how some Mennonite schools in your context were formed. You might want to review the list in the back of the book.
- In many communities there are ongoing tensions between some supporters of public schools and some who are involved in Mennonite education. What is this like in your community?

2. Educational issues

- How is the tension between teaching *facts* and teaching *values* managed in your schools?
- Should attending school be required by the nation? Why? Is the formation of patriots important?
- Many states require some form of standardized testing. Is this theologically positive, negative, or neutral?
- Schools used to focus on reading, writing, and arithmetic. Now there are expectations for computer skills and athletic competition, as well as musical and dramatic experiences. Is this good? Why or why not?

3. School purpose

- Many Mennonite schools (especially high schools) were formed as a response to a decline in commitment to pacifism during World War II. Reflect on the patterns in your community.
- On page 56, Roth notes that some view this model of Christian education to be overly defensive or sectarian. What is your view? Was setting up Mennonite schools effective? Do they continue to serve a useful purpose?
- Has a decrease in Mennonite populations resulted in a decrease in the Mennonite school enrollment in your community?

4. Questions to consider

- On page 62, Roth raises a series of excellent questions. Use these to anticipate his work in the rest of the book. Where do you think he is heading?

Chapter 2: *Theological Starting Points*

1. Distinctiveness

- Following the attacks on September 11, 2001, many Anabaptist-Mennonite schools experienced tensions within their communities as they sought to respond peacefully and also support the nation. What are your memories of those tensions?
- How are Mennonite schools specifically Mennonite? Do they sometimes shift to meet different marketing trends?
- Talk about the connection between particularity or distinctiveness and mission. Would it be possible to be missional without a particular message?

2. Curricular emphases

- Creation matters: Those who believe that creation matters because of our faith are sometimes in tension with those who believe that since we are going to heaven we do not need to care for the earth. Is that tension present in your congregation and community? How does this tension relate to the Mennonite faith?
- History matters: What are the ways that God's presence can be intertwined with stories from history? When might this conflict with some of the national stories?
- Community matters: If a school takes the idea of community seriously, what should characterize the relationships in such a school? Think about relationships between staff members and students both individually and as groups.

- Whole person matters: What does a whole person oriented curriculum look like? What are the implications of this for schools that are experiencing budget constraints?
- World matters: In what sense does a church school speak to the world? What does a balance between spoken and written word look like? How might it be exemplified in the activities and curriculum of a school?

Chapter 3: *Creating Communities of Learning*

1. The feel of the school

- Describe a favorite teacher. What makes this person stand out as a favorite?
- Do you understand the reference to the *invisible curriculum* on page 97? Review the questions listed there. Use them to assess a school with which you are familiar.
- Which of worship activities described on page 98 and following resonate with you? Which do you practice?
- When you walk into a school building, what symbols do you expect? What should be present in a Mennonite school?
- On page 107 Roth gives a rather ambitious list of the ways that a Mennonite school is different? How do you feel about these? Are they legitimate goals?

2. In the last part of this chapter Roth lists a series of pedagogical emphases that are part of an Anabaptist approach to education. In what ways are these unique to Anabaptist-Mennonite schools? Explore the connections that the author makes between these approaches and the Anabaptist emphasis on incarnational theology.

3. Evaluate this list of approaches to education: curiosity, reason, joy, and patience. Prioritize them. Think about the ways that these could be passed on to potential teachers.

Chapter 4: *Outcomes of a Mennonite Education*

1. On page 127 Roth raises a series of questions on what is expected from Mennonite schools. Try to quantify or describe these expectations. How would we know that this is happening?

2. Roth lists a moral framework and spiritual components as two of the contexts in which students should see information. What might that look like in a history class on the birth of a nation or a unit on Shakespeare?

3. Reflect on your own educational experiences. When were you invited to explore the connections between academic learning and-life situations? What kinds of learning outside the classroom took place? How did this change you?

4. There is sometimes a tension between an approach to education that allows for experimentation and exploration and a more controlled and safe approach. How should these be balanced? Should Roth's daughter have been allowed to eat the worm?

5. At the top of page 148 the author outlines how to structure discussions in a way that might help discussion flow more freely and invite more careful listening. Does your congregation practice this method? How have you seen this method used?
6. How are gifts nurtured in your congregation and in your schools? Is there a diverse set of opportunities and experiences or do a few people or students do everything?
7. The chapter ends with an idea of what assessment might look like. Push this out further and think together about what else could be done to assess progress.

Chapter 5: *Keeping the Conversation Alive*

1. This chapter raises many of the significant questions faced by Mennonite schools. Set up a role-play that invites two people to discuss these questions while taking opposite sides. It is often useful to ask people to take the opposite position from the one they would take naturally.
2. In this chapter, the author raises many questions for conversation. Also explore the following ideas or conversation topics.
 - Explore the tension between the values taught in schools and the values that parents want their children to embrace. Is what children learn at school the same as at home? Why or why not?
 - Many families have some discretionary money for things like material possessions, special vacations, lake cottages, or education. What is the spending pattern in your community? Where does education fit in?
 - Some states are discussing a voucher system where tax dollars would go to the same schools that the students are attending. Is this a good or bad idea? What are the implications of this for poor families? How might it dilute the mission of the Mennonite schools?
 - This book makes a clear case against the assumption that children can effectively witness to Christian faith in a school setting. Do you agree? How does this happen or not happen in the public schools in your community?
 - What are the ways that church schools enhance students' ability to articulate faith?
 - Think about the social interactions between different cultural groups of high school students. How well do students engage other groups? What do schools do to enhance these interactions?
 - Assess the visibility of students in your congregation. What is the level of support for different school programs? Is it fair or reasonable?
 - How is the giving to religious education expressed in your congregational budget? Is there conversation about supporting non-Mennonite or non-Christian schools? How does Roth frame this discussion?
 - What does it mean for a school to have an *explicit* denominational identity? Develop a list of markers that identify a school as Mennonite, such as school name, staff background, courses taught, board members, etc. Which of these are the most important? Why?

- The book suggests a program bias toward struggling students. Is this true in church schools you know? How might a school balance the needs of gifted and struggling students?
- The author notes that formative moments are relational rather than due to particular kinds of facilities. Is this true? Tell stories of significant experiences that took place in less-than-ideal facilities.
- Where were the pastors of your congregation educated? What are the implications of this for the place of church schools?

Chapter 6: *Looking to the Future*

1. What institutions have been significant in your life and why?
2. How does a school consider if it is time to close?
3. If sacrifices need to be made for a church school to survive what are the priorities? Facilities? Staff? Mission particularity? Program?
4. What does it mean for a school to “seek new allies”? How does an Anabaptist-Mennonite school reach out to people from other religious backgrounds? What are the attractions or hindrances?
5. The author briefly explores nontraditional educational models. In their day-to-day educational rhythms most Mennonite schools look and act like other schools. There are periods, classrooms, tests, homework, and so on. What are other models that might be possible?

Conclusion

After exploring the issues in this book, what counsel do you have for church leaders who are wrestling with these issues? Please take a few moments to gather your comments and pass them on.