Education Is Mission

Don Steiner

Education is mission!

This assertion is active in its aims and creative, constructive, and engaging in its delivery. For Anabaptist educators, the vocation of teaching is a call to Christian ministry regardless of the type of education or the location of that ministry. To posture "education *as* mission" diminishes education's importance. Education is not next to mission nor is it of less importance or value than other forms of ministry. Rather, the thesis "education *is* mission" declares a dynamic encounter with others, a presence with students to share in their struggles and successes. For some, this will necessitate a redefinition of mission from an obligation to "an alignment with God's purposes in the world."[1] Accordingly, all Christians are missional. Teachers, however, by nature of their roles are in a unique position to minister and influence their students. They engage students, ask probing questions, and tell the truth. In the scriptures, they are revered and hold a sacred trust.[2]

"Education is mission" asserts an emphatic claim that schooling is a valid means of working toward God's ultimate purpose of redemption. We may ask: From an Anabaptist perspective, what missional framework, then, is useful for educators teaching in formal schools, in both local and global contexts? By what means? By what message? And with what results? What do we need to learn, unlearn, relearn from present and past attempts to make schooling an effective means for sustaining and transforming lives to bring healing, shalom, and hope to those in distress while providing life-giving energy to those who are flourishing?

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1 Stanley W. Green and James R. Krabill, eds., *Fully Engaged: Missional Church in an Anabaptist Perspective* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2015), 14.

2 See, for example, 2 Timothy 2:24; Luke 6:40, Ephesians 4:11–12.

My focus in the following is on how Anabaptist educators can be missional within the context of formal public and private education from preschool through seminary while considering contextualization as a means of missional practice.

Missional Approach

Being missional requires that the good news of Jesus be "rooted in scripture, lived in community, enunciated in word, [and] enacted in deed."[3] When Christian educators meet these criteria in their respective roles, missional initiatives occur. For Anabaptist educators, the first two criteria form a foundational pedagogy where beliefs and practices are deeply rooted in scripture and caring communities exist in classrooms. The third criterion, enunciation of faith, appears repeatedly in Mennonite school and university documents as well as in classrooms and interactions with faculty; when "enunciation of faith opportunities" are limited or denied in public education, it is still possible to embody a theology of presence. Missiologist Calvin Shenk proposes, moreover, that "meaningful presence cultivates love and openness in contrast to imposition of one's convictions."[4] A theology of presence demonstrates the gospel and opens doors to faith building, ever patient and fully extended though authentic relationships. Illustrating the fourth criterion, "enacted in deed," theologian Stanley Hauerwas observes that Christian community lives a set of values "visible to the world," where they strive for reconciliation, "tell the truth, honor the poor, . . ., and thereby testify to the amazing community-creating power of God.[5]

To be missional is to be attuned to God's passion to redeem the world, as exemplified by Jesus. Accordingly, missiologist Wilbert Shenk affirms, "At the very heart of Anabaptist belief is the unquestioning centrality of Jesus, who is understood as the clearest reflection we have of God's purposes in the world."[6] Anabaptist educators can take advice from Ephesians 5:1–2 to act as Jesus would. Consequently, their students will build a narrative about who God is as they interact with their teachers who model Jesus. Proselytizing is not needed; sharing God's kingdom is! Further guidance comes from Titus 2:7, whereby all teachers

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3 Green and Krabill, eds., 15.

4 Calvin E. Shenk, "Presence and Patience," in *Anabaptists Meeting Muslims: A Calling for Presence in the Way of Christ*, eds. James R. Krabill et al. (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2005), 230–34; 231.

5 Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1989), 46.

6 Wilbert R. Shenk, *Why Missional and Mennonite Should Make Perfect Sense*, eds. James R. Krabill, et al. (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2005), chap. 1, https://web-s-ebscohost-com.amproxy.palni.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook?sid=c777edbe-9719-402e-acdc-7d89f-c2e084a%40redis&vid=0&format=EK.

are admonished to show themselves in all respects to be models of good works, and in their teaching to show integrity and dignity.

To determine how Anabaptist educators become missional in public arenas, we will first define education and then explore how Anabaptist educators can function in public school settings.

Education Defined[7]

Philosophies of education, with a continuum stretching from behavioristic teacher-centered approaches to inquiry student-centered approaches, and how one defines education are likely to determine the content of curriculum and means of delivery for formal education school structures, whether those structures are public, private, or alternative approaches such as homeschooling or online instruction. Historian Bernard Bailyn describes education as "the entire process by which a culture transmits itself across generations."[8] This definition implies that education is a conversation between generations, with the transfer of knowledge and values as primary aims. Parker Palmer uses the metaphor of dance to describe education: "It is the dance of the spiraling generations, in which the old empower the young with their experience and the young empower the old with new life, reweaving the fabric of the human community as they touch and turn."[9] Catholic educator Thomas Groome sees education as an ontological involvement that shapes "the very 'being' of people—both who they become and how they live in the world."[10] And William Butler Yeats is said to have authored the well-known quote, "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire."[11] Of these various definitions, those that affirm learning as empowering, invitational, and relational are most consistent with Anabaptist missional purposes, which all focus foundationally on growing relationships of healing and hope.

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7 Types of education include formal, nonformal, and informal. Formal education is based on a set curriculum and is usually viewed as schooling. Informal education includes online communities or discussion forums, while nonformal education includes community, early learning programs, and adult education. This discussion is limited to formal education.

8 Bernard Bailyn, *Education in the Forming of American Society* (New York: Vintage, 1960), 14, quoted in Thomas H. Groome, *Educating for Life: A Spiritual Vision for Every Teacher and Parent* (Allen, TX: Thomas More, 1998), 35.

9 Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 13, 25.

10 Groome, *Educating for Life*, 35.

11 Robert Strong, "'Education Is Not the Filling of a Pail, but the Lighting of a Fire': It's an Inspiring Quote, but Did WB Yeats Say It?," *The Irish Times*, October 15, 2013, https://www.irishtimes.com/tags/robert-a-strong/.

Education is also defined by the personhood of each teacher. In Palmer's words, teachers "teach who [they] are"![12] Thus, it is significant that Anabaptist teachers in public schools are not white knights on a mission to save education but rather servant leaders who, through a calm and confident presence, build relationships with their students, promote scholarship and inquiry, challenge inequities, advocate for justice, and provide life-giving opportunities. In the process, they address the very soul and spirit of the students they teach.

Public education in the United States has traditionally been represented by students in a "melting pot" of ethnicities, religious backgrounds, and various socioeconomic levels characteristic of a pluralistic society. It has been a great experiment in democracy, with a primary aim of bringing together students of diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds to forge a national community. When carried out well, such education enhances human development and leads to increased mobility and economic progress.

This traditional representation is quickly changing, however, to a "tossed salad" concept of recognizing individual learning preferences and ideological, religious, and gender differences that often contribute to political polarization. Anabaptist educators, regardless of where they teach, have been taught to honor the diversity among their students and to advocate for all. They are invitational and relational in their praxis, and they seek solutions for broken systems. As a result, their students often find success and satisfaction in their classroom learning and extracurricular and intramural activities despite the ferment surrounding them.

So, can Anabaptist educators be missional in their respective educational settings? The answer is an emphatic yes! But it requires contextualization.

Contextualization

Given the dynamic and changing nature of society in the twenty-first century, what are the implications for Anabaptist educators, regardless of whether they teach in public, private, or alternative settings in the United States or abroad? The global world is rapidly evolving, and the demographics of many communities are quite different from what they were one century ago. The predictions of the 1960s that the minority population will become the majority is fast becoming a reality. According to the Pew Research Center, if all the refugees and migrants lived in one country, that country would be the fifth most populous country in the world.[13] Harrisonburg City Public Schools system is a good example of this

12 Palmer, *Courage to Teach*, 1.

13 Phillip Connor, "International Migration: Key Findings from the U.S., Europe and the world," Pew Research Center, December 15, 2016, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/12/15/international-migration-key-findings-from-the-u-s-europe-and-the-world/.

population shift. The district has 10 schools and 6,505 students, with 68 percent minority enrollment, 37 percent classified as English Language Learners, and migration as the primary driver.[14]

In the 1990s anthropologist and missiologist Paul Hiebert projected that in the new global era "we must move beyond anti-colonialism to world thinking" and recognize the emerging interlocking sociocultural systems throughout the world. Hiebert asked, "How do we bring theology and the social sciences together in missiology?"[15] This is a question for Anabaptist educators to answer regardless of their education setting.

Missiologist and anthropologist Darrell Whiteman says, "Contextualization attempts to communicate the Gospel in word and deed and to establish the church in ways that make sense to people within their local cultural context."[16] For Anabaptist teachers, contextualization includes teaching with culturally relevant strategies and providing leadership in cultural proficiency not only in the classroom but also in policies and practices of schools as bridge-building processes.

Much could be written about "education is mission" within the context of Mennonite higher education. The following description of Eastern Mennonite University's undergraduate and graduate teacher education program seeking to contextualize provides just one example of such.

Teacher Education at Eastern Mennonite University (Harrisonburg, Virginia)

While Eastern Mennonite University's (EMU's) undergraduate and graduate teacher education program accommodates life in schools as it is, it also promotes engaged learning, competence in knowledge, reflection in decision-making, and an "ethic of care" more aligned with Groome's and Yeats's definitions of education (above). Specifically, a major role of the teacher preparation program is to engage teachers and teacher candidates in the broader curricular discussions involving faith values. This helps empower teachers and administrators in public and private arenas to influence change and transform structures.

14 "Overview of Harrisonburg City Public Schools," Harrisonburg City Public Schools website, accessed March 29, 2023, https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/virginia/districts/harrisonburg-city-pblc-schs-110399. (Note: This report is based on data from the 2017–2018 and 2018–2019 school years.)

15 Paul G. Hiebert, "Missiological Education for a Global Era," in *Missiological Education for the Twenty-First Century: The Book, the Circle, and the Sandals*, eds. J. Dudley Woodberry et al. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 34–42; 37.

16 Darrell L. Whiteman, "Three Functions of Contextualization," Mission Musings, July 22, 2017, https://munsonmissions.org/2017/07/22/three-functions-of-contextualization/.

EMU's undergraduate and graduate program uses the byline *becoming teachers who teach boldly in a changing world through an ethic of care and critical reflection*, with the distinction of integrating Anabaptist principles within the profession of teaching. These principles—which emphasize community, caring relationship, service to others, peacebuilding and conflict transformation, and stewardship of resources—help EMU graduates embody and enact culturally responsive caring in their classrooms. This includes, for example, using restorative justice and trauma and resilience practices in public schools. As a result of learning these restorative practices, many EMU graduates have taken the concept back to their respective schools for implementation, and EMU's graduate teacher education program has become highly influential in this area of practice, not only in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia but also in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.[17]

Although EMU's educational philosophy is generally aligned with curriculum used in local public and private schools, there are times when philosophical differences are acknowledged. Nevertheless, in its leadership role as innovators in education over the years, the Education Department at EMU has contributed to teacher development literally throughout the world, including local and regional public schools and Mennonite Education Agency-affiliated schools. Many EMU graduates are on the "teaching mission field" now serving in public schools, private schools, Mennonite schools, and online schools, in both nonformal and informal education contexts. Others leave a rich legacy of service, where their commitment to excellence and their dedication to their students and communities continues to make an exponential difference over the years.

Role of Anabaptist Educators within Public Schools

So what specific roles do Anabaptist educators serve within public school structures? Some would respond, "None!" These respondents may cite separation of church and state, with the caveat that personal witness is neither acceptable nor legal—and they would be correct. On this matter, however, school law generally addresses situations whereby schools impose rather than expose religious teachings. For example, although some of the larger public schools offer a course in biblical literature, they would challenge outright the practice of praying on the fifty-yard line of a football game, opening a school board meeting with prayer, or including an alter call at a school assembly.

Other critics may say that, given the aims of public education, the problems inherent in the educational system are too great and complex and therefore

17 While it is true that many public schools of education prepare their teachers to practice conflict transformation in public schools, doing so does not make them proclaimers of the gospel; that is not their mission. However, in many cases the "healing and hope" message is conveyed nevertheless.

Christian teachers should not engage.[18] They say education is not capable of solving the malaise that grips society, that curriculum is obsolete and riddled with inequities and structural racism. They assert that schools are layered with Eurocentric and gender-biased curricula, have poor learning performance, and are beyond reform. School violence and complaints from parents about losing control of their "share" of the public enterprise predominate in the news. Teachers are weary and stressed, torn apart and exhausted.

While critics of formal education can be harsh, often they are accurate in their indictments. The list of faults perpetrated by education is long. However, one only needs to read the historical foundations of education to find that controversies, calls for reform, and politics have taken place throughout the decades and centuries and have become ingrained in the institution over time. Ferment over public education is not new.

Criticisms of education that plague public schools will continue to be ongoing since schools reflect the aspirations and values as well as the angst of broader society. This bedevilment manifests itself from generation to generation and is certainly a reality to be addressed. But what better place for Anabaptist teachers to serve than in bringing leadership to this environment, precisely at a time when the world needs new vision to make society better for all? Theirs is not only a constructive task but also a healing ministry. As our Anabaptist theology reminds us, connecting God's healing and hope with a broken and hurting world will require engagement with that world.

To illustrate, two EMU teacher educators, Kendal Swartzentruber and Jesse Rodriguez, began teaching special education in local public schools. They collaborated to create a peer mentorship program that featured a classroom blog with videos, photos, and text published by their students. Both educators, now in the service of the Virginia Department of Education, currently coordinate the "I'm Determined" project, a statewide project involving special educators to resource youth with special needs and their families.[19] As Kendal and Jesse fold justice, love, and humility into their teaching, both of them experience their work as an expression of Anabaptist values.[20]

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18 For example, some believe that Anabaptist educators who teach in public schools are contributing to the very problems of society, such as structural racism, and therefore should not participate or seek employment in public education. These critics see public schools as a new form of colonialism.

19 Lauren Jefferson, "Alumni Educators Co-produce Short Film Series on Teenagers in the Disability Community," *EMU Weekly News Digest*, March 21, 2023, https://emu.edu/now/news/2023/alumni-educators-co-produce-short-film-series-on-teenagers-in-the-disability-community/.

20 Emails from Kendal Swartzentruber and Jesse Rodriguez to the author, March 28, 2023. Other educators claiming no religious background have contributed in special ways as well to the project.

Some Anabaptist educators experience more academic freedom than others to express their faith in public schools. This is often true for those who serve as professors in various disciplines in public universities as opposed to those teaching at the public K–12 levels. For instance, one Mennonite mathematics professor, now retired, who taught at a state university always sought to integrate his faith with learning. On a routine basis he introduced himself at the beginning of each semester with his own faith statement, which resulted in follow-up conversations with his students about the meaning of life. Some of his former students still correspond with him today.

Roles of Anabaptist Educators within Private Schools

While public education invites educators to address a myriad of challenges, private education is also a major arena of service for Anabaptist educators. Although the contexts of private school educators vary, most allow more latitude than public schools do to "enunciate the word" as an expectation for meeting the mission statements of their respective schools. These educators teach in Mennonite preschools, elementary schools, and secondary schools as well as Mennonite universities and seminaries, where the expectation is that all criteria for being missional is explicit.

What are the specific roles of these Anabaptist educators? Palmer Becker reminds us that Anabaptist Christians aspire to "help reconcile people to God," "reconcile people to each other," and "be ambassadors of reconciliation to the world" to enable the transformation of hearts and minds.[21] This is the work of Mennonite education. Educator and historian John Roth asserts, and correctly so, that "at its core, education is the means by which humans negotiate how they relate to each other, how they engage with the natural world, and how they understand ultimate questions of goodness, justice, and truth."[22]

Andrea Wenger, director of advancement for Eastern Mennonite School (K–12) in Harrisonburg, Virginia, shares the following incident that illustrates this connection between education and mission:

> Shannon Roth, Eastern Mennonite School U.S. history and government teacher, went to college to pursue a career in ministry. Midway though, she changed her Bible major to secondary education.

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21 Palmer Becker, "What Is an Anabaptist Christian?," in *Fully Engaged: Missional Church in an Anabaptist Perspective*, eds. Stanley W. Green and James R. Krabill (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2015), chap. 13, https://web-p-ebscohost-com.amproxy.palni.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook?sid=7200e7ad-e886-460c-9304-8889388088d9%40redis&vid=0&format=EK.

22 John D. Roth, *Teaching That Transforms: Why Anabaptist-Mennonite Education Matters* (Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing Network, 2011), 16.

> "I didn't become a minister," Shannon has been heard to muse.
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> The high school principal, Justin King, calls her out, saying "You ARE a minister! Our teachers are ministers in the Anabaptist-tradition every day. And the world needs Anabaptist education now more than ever.[23]

Anabaptist Formal Schooling within an International Mission Context

In 2004, Klementina and Dini Shahini, native Albanians, were living and working in Chesapeake, Virginia. Klementina proposed to Virginia Mennonite Missions (VMM) a plan that grew out of her master's thesis—to start a Christian school with an Anabaptist perspective in their native city of Lezhe, Albania. In 2007, VMM sent Klementina and two couples to Albania to conduct a feasibility study in Lezhe. One of the couples was well versed in business and the other in education. While conducting their study, the group had a chance encounter with the Prime Minister of Albania, Sali Berisha, who inquired about their purpose. When he heard about their desire to start a Christian school, he offered encouragement, saying, "We are in need of quality education, and we would welcome such a school."

Four years later, when enough resources had been generated stateside to start operations, the Shahinis moved back to Lezhe from Chesapeake. In 2011 Virginia Mennonite Missions launched Lezha Academic Center (LAC). The inauguration of the new school occurred that September, with an official approval letter signed by Prime Minister Berisha. Local dignitaries helped cut the ribbon.

That fall LAC opened with twenty students and four expatriate teachers; three of the teachers were recent graduates of Eastern Mennonite University's teacher education program, and one was a new graduate of Messiah University (Grantham, Pennsylvania). A retired public school educator and his wife from Ohio joined Klementina in providing administrative guidance.

Now, twelve years later, having survived an earthquake and the Covid pandemic, LAC is a bustling school with one hundred eighty students grades 1–12, with eleven Albanian teachers, three expatriate teachers, and a retired cardiologist and his wife from Pennsylvania who teach each spring semester; he teaches biology, and she serves as a teacher's aide in the elementary grades. Of the twenty-five or so graduates of LAC each year, most enroll in universities in Albania, Europe, Canada, and stateside. Many attend Mennonite colleges, with a higher percentage gravitating to Canadian Mennonite University (CMU) in Winnipeg, Canada, or LCC International in Lithuania. Currently, LAC is an affiliate member of

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23 Andrea Schrock Wenger, "Mennonite Teachers: We See You," Mennonite Church USA (blog), May 03, 2022, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/menno-snapshots/mennonite-teachers-we-see-you/.

Mennonite Schools Council, a network of Mennonite early childhood through grade twelve schools sponsored by Mennonite Education Agency.

This grade 1–12 school, developed as an *education is mission* school, serves as a case study for missions in an international context. While LAC is entrusting the future of their missional program to God, for now there are strong signs that the school is contributing in significant ways to both church and community.

Three Lezha Academic Center (LAC) Graduate Profiles

Oriola, an LAC student, was baptized by Dini Shahini while in high school. She attended law school at the University of London, England, and is now a practicing attorney in London. In June 2022, she interpreted the sermon at the joint Virginia Mennonite Missions and Lezha Academic Center's tenth-year celebration.

Three Roma sisters,[24] all graduates of LAC, now live in Winnipeg, Canada. Two graduated from CMU: one is currently a nurse, the other employed. The younger sister is enrolled at CMU.

Donaldo, an LAC student who transferred to Central Christian in Ohio and then was encouraged to attend Eastern Mennonite University by his counselor, is now in medical school in Cyprus.

Building Community through Education

More missional stories of the unfolding of God's kingdom could be told. The following anecdote, for example, shows how Klementina Shahini has built local community capacity through LAC.

One day a Roma father came to Klementina's office wishing to enroll his son and daughter at LAC. The father told her, however, that he had no job and no money for tuition. Sensing the sincerity of the request, Klementina asked a local contractor and supporter of LAC if he would consider hiring this Roma father so he might provide for his family and pay tuition for his son and daughter. Today, both son and daughter are enrolled at LAC, and the Roma father is a faithful participant in the local Mennonite-affiliated church's weekday literacy program.

Challenges of Formal Education in an International Context

When evaluating formal schooling within an international context, critics observe that mission schools and teachers purvey Eurocentric curriculums insensitive to local culture. Thus, they suggest that any engagement in such an enterprise cannot and should not be considered missional since it is likely to result in unintended negative consequences that disassociate students from their heritage, such as cultural domination. While this certainly is a danger, it is an insufficient reason for not moving forward. Formal schooling within an international context is a

24 "Roma" people are sometimes referred to colloquially as "gypsies."

worrisome endeavor, but to disengage and not attempt to learn from the colonialistic past is not an option if we are to participate in the Great Commission (Matt 28:19–20).

Some critics also assert that "institutional building" is counterproductive, especially in international or cross-cultural settings, and that they would not support establishing a school such as LAC. They maintain that we need more church plants through which to proclaim the message of Christ, not more missional institutions. Others remind us that that the research for "schooling" as a means for missional outreach is deeply flawed and that endeavors such as LAC will likely result in a curriculum that is not only insensitive to the local culture but also a "brain drain" on the community.

Such criticisms can be helpful since listening is important to the process of learning, unlearning, and relearning. The anecdote to addressing these concerns is authentic contextualization. When successful partnerships are formed and sustained, cultural barriers diminish. As a result, expanded opportunities for youth are created and leadership capacity emerges for the future.

Today's global world calls Anabaptist educators to equip young people with "tough sandals" and spiritual direction so they can discern where to go and how to serve.

Education Is Mission

In conclusion, we again consider the question posed at the beginning: "From an Anabaptist perspective, what missional framework is useful for Anabaptist educators teaching in formal schools in both local and global contexts?" In a fast-paced changing world, Anabaptist educators will seek solutions with reflection, all the while advancing the sacred task of transforming lives, building community capacity, and walking alongside those with whom they relate. In so doing, they will incorporate elements of Christian discipleship such as restorative justice and an ethic of care, which serve as markers of the essence of being missional—proclamation of the gospel. Such work is a Holy Task!

In a paraphrase of Daniel 12:3, Groome reminds us that "those who teach others unto justice shall shine like the stars of heaven forever."[25] And from the book of Matthew, he adds: "It seems that the decisive criterion by which our lives will be measured for eternity is how we have cared for the neighbor most in need."[26] This is why education is mission!

25 Groome, *Educating for Life*, 35.

26 Groome, 86.