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Symposium Review: *The Teacher's Manual*—Jennifer Anderson

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Symposium review: **Anderson, Jennifer. 2020.** *The Teacher's Manual: Learning to Teach, Applying Methods, Navigating Management, and Pondering School Issues.* Millersburg, OH: Acorn Publishing. Pp. 308. \$12.00.

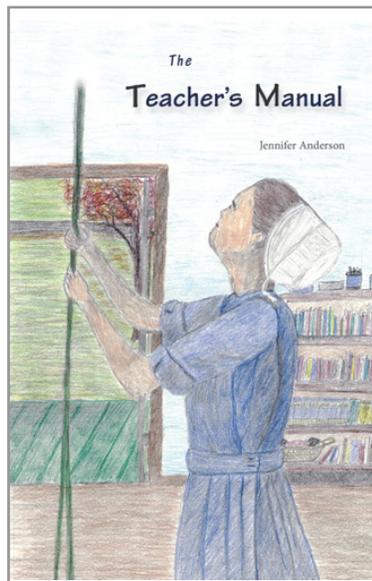
Review 1

By Caleb and Keri Yoder
New Order Amish

OVERVIEW AND SUMMARY

A compilation of an experienced teacher's advice and wisdom, *The Teacher's Manual* conveys tons of information in a methodical, serious tone. The author, Jennifer Anderson, has taught in a variety of settings including parochial schools, Christian day schools, and public schools. Her pupils came from a range of Conservative Mennonites, Old Order Mennonites, Amish, Amish-Mennonites, Dunkard Brethren, and non-Anabaptists. She has taught every grade level. Her book is directed at Amish and Mennonite teachers and tackles not only the oft-heard problems and misunderstandings but also wades into the sticky stuff teachers face. She not only lists potential problems but also provides clear directions for solving them. A side theme emerges as Anderson points out how parochial schools should appear and relate to government officials and the general public if they wish their freedom to continue.

The introduction features the story of the *Wisconsin v. Yoder* case, and the repercussions of it. Having been Amish teachers ourselves and yet never hearing that, we were glad to know the details of that pivotal incident. In 1972, after enduring jail time, abductions, property damage, and heavy fines, the Amish were granted permission to educate their children outside of the public school system. Reasons for this separation are listed. Sadly, the following generations have grown foggy on these very issues.



With that sober analysis, the first part of the book addresses the need for caution when hiring teachers. A teacher is an example of godly conduct and should require the same of her students. The part included why a certain school may be a bad fit for you and the different ways schools and their staff work together. It tackles teacher wages and the pros and cons of male or female teachers.

The second part of the book deals directly with everyday things teachers face: rules and procedures that should be in place, general health precautions, tests, homework, grading, and standardized tests. It talks about grade inflection, an interesting phenomena, and shows how it is misleading and ultimately, dishonest.

The third section dives into the heart—how to teach, and the best ways to involve students and ensure they are learning. In this section, the author uses a few real-life examples, modeling proper teaching, lesson planning, and delivering.

Part four discusses the classroom and its décor, arrangement, technology, and manners. It briefly touches recess time.

Part five is on classroom management. It emphasizes the need for teachers to be confident and authoritative but also when to report to higher powers and how. It lists reminders to use for offenses and how to keep them from snowballing.

Part six, “Special Events and Concluding the Year,” offers advice about field trips, substitutes, programs, and boredom breakers.

These six parts make up the body of the book. However, the afterword contains another sober analysis of “Contemporary Trends Influencing Conservative Anabaptist Schools” and lists six trends. The author hinted at these throughout the book but here takes the space to explain them more fully.

KERI'S REVIEW

The Teacher's Manual was unlike any other teaching book for plain teachers that I have read. Many of those are written in story form, and only

give one method of dealing with a particular problem. Also, a teacher, especially a female teacher, is encouraged to submit to the community and local school board. While Anderson is not promoting rebellion of any sort, she does encourage knowing what you believe and running the school according to state standards and godly principles. If the teacher receives opposition that cannot be remedied with clear communication, “she must decide whether the community is worth staying in” (p. 242).

For the most part, the author excellently captures the conservative Anabaptist viewpoint, and quotes frequently from *Blackboard Bulletin*, an Amish published periodical. Also, she points out some theories the Amish/Mennonites believe about themselves and their schools that are not true. For example, “there is also a sort of marked pride that ‘our’ children do better and thus do not need much supervision. However, all children are human and need continual guidance...” (p. 187 “Recess Time”). And another example, “Sometimes we also feel that our schools should have a better average than public schools because we are Christian schools and have a better learning environment....This is a fallacy....” (p. 98 “Class Work and Grading”).

The book lacked eye appeal, and the back cover introduction was a bit lengthy and not very helpful. Since the author does not openly draw from or share her own experiences, I wondered if she had taught or if she was just interested in parochial schools. The “About the Author,” tucked behind the Afterword, was informative and helped me see why the author was qualified to write *The Teacher’s Manual*. Also, the book seems intended for a reference source, not a gripping page turner.

However, I did learn a lot, and the author put in words some things I hadn’t heard before. Such as, when all the teachers are girls, the men in authority can lose touch with the school. Too often these girl teachers are left to attempt solving problems on their own. If they ask for advice, they are only given vague answers. I have seen that happen, only I had not identified it so neatly. Another thing that causes misunderstandings between parents and teachers is grade inflation. Parents think their child’s grades are fine, but the teacher says they are failing. Both sides know the grade expectations have changed since the parents have gone to school, but no one understands why or how. The

author clearly explains this. Most teachers would also benefit from understanding and using grade rubrics in those hard-to-grade subjects.

The Teacher’s Manual is an effective tap on the head to awaken Conservative Anabaptists dozing in the security of “our schools.” Teachers would do well to keep this book handy, and school boards and parents would be able to serve the school in more productive ways after reading it. The book conveys a burden for the preservation of not only our Christian schools, but in essence, our faith.

CALEB’S REVIEW

I appreciated a lot about this book. The author’s experience gives her insights to problems that every school deals with. She touches on current dangers such as the influence of modern psychology and visual media that older books like Rod & Staff’s *Handbook for Creative Teaching* are silent on. It’s easy for a teacher to decide such issues are up to personal discretion because we don’t have clear direction. This book sounds the trumpet, especially in the Afterword.

Another benefit of the author’s broad experience is her respect for diversity. Not only does she address different types of school structures, she repeatedly mentions that children should not be allowed to poke fun at any racial groups or more conservative church groups.

The whole book rests firmly on the basic principles of respect and order. This is refreshing in a world where freedom and creativity sound much more socially acceptable. But no, teachers have a responsibility to require respect and order. The teacher that doesn’t do this will face unpleasant results. The author includes good procedures for small problems (pp. 225-26). I like this because if a teacher takes care of the small issues, 95 percent of the big issues will never surface. Many teacher books focus heavily on those big issues.

Here are a few things I wish were different in the book. First is the artwork. The author did her own, which is commendable, but I think it lacks clarity. The front cover especially doesn’t say “school” immediately. I honestly thought the lady was grasping a stick, but I think it was supposed to be a bell rope. That also didn’t resonate clearly with me; the bell rope and classroom look like a typical Amish one-room school but the lady looks

Amish-Mennonite and the content of the book is clearly not specific to one-room schools. I would rather see simpler more school-focused artwork, even maybe just line drawings.

The title does not totally fit the content of the book either. It's not so much a manual or handbook as a collection of experiences and ponderings on Christian education. I would expect a manual to have an index and ramble less. I found references to the community's view of education scattered in at least three places in the book.

The same experience and worldview that qualifies the author to write a book on teaching also make for content that is probably more personal opinion than Scripture-based truth. For example, the health protocol she recommends (pp. 64-74) are likely not as important in schools of fewer than 30 students. Besides in a post-COVID-19 world, it sounds suspiciously similar to mask mandates and CDC regulation.

Another example is her strong negative view of children in the workplace (pp. 287-89). While I share her concerns about taking advantage of child labor, I feel that on farms and in small family businesses, children working at school age can be a form of apprenticeship that teaches much better work ethics and skills than a college education would. That was part of the basis for *Wisconsin v. Yoder* to stop formal education at eighth grade. The early teens is an excellent time for children to work alongside good role models, ideally their parents. That said, these formative years should not be wasted providing cheap labor for a large corporation.

In conclusion, I'd say the person who will benefit most from this book is a new teacher. However, it will help anyone interested in our school system to broaden his understanding of the big picture.

Husband and wife Caleb and Keri Yoder are experienced teachers who reside in Belle Center, OH. Presently, Caleb is an active teacher and Keri is a homemaker.

Review 2

By Jonathan Erb

Western Conservative Mennonite Fellowship

The Teacher's Manual was written by Jennifer Anderson, published in 2020 by Acorn Publishing (an operation of Cory and Jennifer Anderson, the author and her husband).

Anderson is writing to school teachers of Christian schools in the conservative Mennonite and Amish communities. Most of the material in this book would be very beneficial for both parents and school board members. At times, the material in fact belongs to these secondary parties and not teachers, because it is beyond the scope of a teacher's influence or responsibility. But in whole, the material is properly named - *The Teacher's Manual*.

The theme of this book is obvious - it is primarily a how-to book for teachers. The subtitle is appropriate: *Learning to Teach, Applying Methods, Navigating Management, and Pondering School Issues*. Having taught school myself for many terms, I often responded "Yes, it is so!" while reading. It stirred up my teacher passion again, proving that "you can get a teacher out of the classroom, but you cannot get a classroom out of the teacher."

Anderson has a high regard for schools. Schools are presented as central and even mandatory for the continuation of conservative Anabaptist communities. A serious, realistic, and sometimes urgent tone is used to discuss both the day to day workings of a classroom and the overarching paradigms necessary for the success and sustainability of our schools.

While the majority of our teachers are given much responsibility, they are not given much training, considered in the light of the importance and impact they carry. This book is an effort by one who understands this need and understands the potential of the classroom to strengthen our communities and Kingdom calling. Anderson is well equipped to do this, having taught for many years in multiple settings ranging through the spectrum of Mennonite and Amish practices. She has done what few have - confronted the daunting task of setting out a scope and sequence for a book about the complex and manifold aspects of teaching, and then moved the idea into a readable

reality. This book has slightly over 300 pages of valuable information.

An often quoted resource is articles from *Blackboard Bulletin*. Some of the articles referenced are from the '60s, and some are much more recent - all share timeless perspective. Another source is the book *School Bells Ringing*, also from Pathway Publishers. Other resources include workshop material from Faith Builders and Christian Light inspirational school programs. Yet this is not a collection of reprinted articles and ideas - these other sources are woven into largely original work for the purpose of lending perspective and increasing authority to the subject being addressed.

A book similar in content which also is accessible to the intended audience is *Handbook for Creative Teaching*, Rod and Staff Publishers. The content of this book is quite similar, although the format gives this book a different feel. True to handbook form, *Handbook for Creative Teaching* does not so readily lend itself to reading cover to cover; this one does. While called a manual, it does invite reading in entirety rather than browsing or trying to locate specific information in an index as a handbook would have.

The introduction makes mention of the legal foundation of our schools, established by the SCOTUS case *Wisconsin v. Yoder*. Anderson refers to the reasons the Court ruled in favor of the Amish. She appeals to all of us that we exercise ourselves diligently in the functions of Plain People which were noticed and influential in this monumental, precedent setting ruling. In a paragraph beginning "Prudence behooves schools and communities to examine themselves..." a number of candid observations about ourselves indicate that we have ground to gain to live worthy of the exemptions granted us by our kindly government. In this paragraph and a few other places in the book, it is evident that the author's goal is not to make us comfortable with the status quo but rather stir us up in areas which truly need challenge and improvement.

The more difficult aspects of teaching are not ignored. For example, a comprehensive portion addresses the "kibitzer," the one "who looks over your shoulder and criticizes and gives their opinions about what you do even when you did not ask for them."

In almost shocking frankness, prospective teachers are told simple ways to take inventory of a community and its potential problems before committing to teach. "School is about working together, and you need to know whether support will be there." Elsewhere, teachers are advised to look for "greener grass" if disrespect is an ignored, perennial issue. As a former teacher, I agree with these portions and desire that those who have not taught or have a ho-hum disposition toward school support would be able to read and understand this perspective so rarely but candidly shared.

I especially enjoyed the section giving practical advice for teaching. Teachers don't often analyze the exchange between teacher and student. This can be quite instructive! Various common statements by students are also analyzed in easy-to-understand language, so when teachers encounter this kind of talk, they have at least met it before (in a book) and know something of the common attitude behind it.

A lengthy section examines media (video) learning as opposed to book learning. For most of us, this section is no shallow treatment of the subject. Anderson explains the subtle dangers of screen learning and how this overrated, new and improved method of schooling brings with it some very real dangers and influences. Sections with titles such as "About speaking," "What to say and how to say it," and "Non-verbal communication" give many practical tips for teaching far more effectively than any video could ever achieve.

Another section titled "What Children Say" explains the underlying message of common statements such as "Nobody likes me," "I never get to wash the board," "Someone stole my pencil," and other comments which sometimes pop up in classrooms.

I found this book very readable and refreshingly frank. While written from a lofty perspective of school, it remains grounded in practical wisdom. For example, about those complex situations that tire even the veteran teacher, we are admonished, "Although our schools claim to be Christian and unfair situations should not exist, teachers need to be realistic and remember that every Christian is still human and may not behave as a Christian. Sometimes for teachers, Christlikeness looks like submitting to the inability to please everyone..."

In a section titled "Afterword," six short contemporary trends influencing conservative

Anabaptist schools are addressed. To me, these six subjects range from the most pertinent and alarming trend of all, “A Negative View of Rules,” to a situation I have never heard of: “How Business Went to School One Day.” In short article form, Anderson explains how worldly businesses prey on our scholars, with school donations and other “helpful” programs, with the obvious intent of later hiring industrious Amish/Mennonite labor. Perhaps this is happening on a more local scene than national, but that is not explained.

This book will keep alive the saying, “Never judge a book by its cover.” Many of us would see value in a hardbound, professionally designed, and even expensive cover for this book. Of such adornments or even leather this book is worthy. However, the artwork on the front, and sprinkled lightly throughout, will likely be regarded as childish and demeaning by some. Perhaps in a more nuanced mindset and culture this type of artwork makes sense. Unfortunately, this will probably limit the amount of circulation, even in some Anabaptists communities who really could and should benefit from this thoughtful work.

This book was written to encourage the vision for Christian day schools and to “lift up the hands which hang down.” For those who read it, I have no doubt that this book will succeed in these invaluable functions. In the end, the behind-the-scenes work toward stronger schools this book will prompt will be less obvious than the results we are bound to see.

Jonathan Erb is a member of the Western Conservative Mennonite Fellowship, a former teacher, and, currently, a school representative for Christian Light Education (Christian Light Publications).

The Teacher’s Manual is available for \$12 + \$4 s/h. from Acorn Publishing, P.O. Box 37, Mt. Hope, OH 44660. <http://acornpublishing.info/>