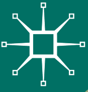

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Student Perspectives on Inclusive School Cultures

Nigel Newton

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Nigel Newton

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The book is dedicated to children from disadvantaged backgrounds and children who may have struggled without support to learn and progress within the school system. These groups of young people often have little idea how uneven the educational playing field is, how flawed the promise of meritocracy. They must battle and struggle throughout their schooling, sometimes in tough and unforgiving environments. I hope this book contributes at least in part to creating school environments which will help, care and support these students more effectively. There is 'that of God' in these children too.

Foreword

When I was 11, my recently widowed mother completed the move planned by my father from south London to a village near Carlisle. As if our bereavement had not been a dislocation enough, we found ourselves in a place where most of our neighbours were distant relations of each other and where our long vowels were met with the same incomprehension we felt on hearing the local dialect. However, the more significant and enduring alteration was in my schooling. In Surrey, I had attended an all-boys preparatory school aiming for a 'common entrance' examination to a public school at age 13. It was a place in which I thrived at the edge of subterfuge, regularly caned for my misdemeanours and all too often involved in one fight or another. In Cumbria, the educational choices were different. My parents wanted a private education for their youngest but needed it to fit within their strict and particular atheism. Faced with a choice between a Roman Catholic school in Carlisle or a Quaker one at Wigton, they chose the one they felt would do me the least harm, what was perceived to be the least religious. When years later I became a committed Quaker my mother openly asked both what she had done to deserve this (appealing to an absent God?) and where she had gone wrong. For me, going to a Quaker school was initially extremely discomforting but ultimately presented salvation from a potential spiral into nihilism.

It was discomforting for a number of reasons. I came across 'girls' for the first time in my sheltered existence. There was no caning. There was little going on in the school that might even warrant such a punishment in

'worldly' places. Pupils called each other by their first names, a practice it took a few weeks to get used to. This was a different culture and one that gave me a chance to 'start again', not to excel academically but to feel a sense of worth in what I could achieve, and to see the worth in others. Even with very few Quaker staff and pupils, I can look back at that experience and see it as decidedly and distinctly Quaker in its tone, style and content. It was a culture of care.

Of course, I didn't necessarily see it at the time and editing the school magazine as a recent old scholar then into Marxist ideology, I abused my position and lambasted the privileged nature of the private school I had just left. We have to live with our regrets.

Later, I was on a young adult Quaker group looking at the perennial issue of Quaker independent education. This was a group of angry young Quakers, both annoyed at the fee-paying status of Quaker schools but also disgruntled at how they did not appear thoroughly Quaker. The need to act as commercial entities seemed to dampen what we saw as a necessary sectarian ardour and this frustrated the young purists. When I realised the mixed agenda of both wishing these schools did not exist and wanting them to exist in a particular way, I left the group. As Nigel Newton points out, private Quaker education is a vexed question for Quakers, a perennial debate in the letters pages of *The Friend*. How can Quakers, who believe in the equal worth of all, sustain a system only open to privileged few? On the other hand, is it not important to offer an alternative kind of education, perhaps particularly to the privileged, so that they might carry forward a social conscience into their subsequent work lives? Quaker schools also, it is argued, act as a source of outreach, imbibing a latent spirituality that may later bring somebody into the Quaker fold, as happened for me. The introduction of free education for all by default placed Quaker schooling, initially set up to protect Quaker children from wider culture, into a private segment of the education system that the schools found they needed to navigate, morally, educationally and commercially. It is ironic but understandable that the marketing departments of the schools Nigel researched were more interested in his findings than the educators.

In the end of course, Quaker schools will exist as long as there is a demand for them. They are independent, responsible for their own finances and fortunes. Mine closed not long after I left and others too, even since when Nigel began his research.

So, what are we to learn from this educational experiment in an alternative ethos? And how alternative is the Quaker vision over and against non-Quaker schools run on libertarian or communitarian ideologies? The attempt to answer these questions is why this book is so important. In the end it is not about what makes a Quaker school 'Quaker' but about what allows a learner to thrive. What was it at Wigton that set me on an upward trajectory rather than spinning me into hateful uncontrol? Is there anything in the spiritual architecture of Quaker schooling that sets it apart? Someone once told me that they didn't think anyone could leave a Quaker school without a social conscience. How is that empathy enculturated so organically even without a majority of Quaker staff or pupils? How does ethos transmit? Howard Brinton in his 1949 volume on Quaker pedagogy listed ten principles under four headings of community, pacifism, equality and simplicity. He located the source of these principles in the meeting for worship (the collective silent approach to listening to God that Quakers in Britain have practiced for over 370 years in which *anyone* may speak) and in meeting for worship for business. This latter practice is how Quakers discern decisions using a method based in worship in which there are no votes but rather a search for unity. Unity denotes having discerned faithfully, at least for now, and it is a powerful method of decision-making that flies in the face of proposing, seconding and voting. Worship replaces power games. Silence replaces shouting. Pauses replace the victory of the loudest voice. Minutes agreed collectively contemporaneously replace the ability to represent the decisions in preferred terms later on. Enacted in school settings, both silent worship and this method of collective decision-making are powerfully deviant in the best sense and as this book shows, have a significant effect in terms of creating a community of inclusion in which concern for the individual becomes contagious. Even in a setting where there is an explicit hierarchy between those who teach and the taught, the radical equality consequent to the Quaker method can nurture a sense of social place. Rank can be translated into different life stages and the living out of different gifts. Teachers can be seen to be following a vocation of service to the person each pupil will become, rather than working to enforce a regime of discipline and punishment to keep the unruly in line and get them through exams. Relationship can trump regulation.

This may sound naïve or over-idealistic and as this book shows, there is within Quaker schools a complex interaction of spiritual values, an ethos

aimed at respect and equality of worth, and educational practice. It is the mining of this complexity that makes this book so valuable. It is a book not just for those interested in Quaker schooling but for anyone who cares about an inclusive education in which all learners can thrive. I commend it to you.

Centre for Postgraduate Quaker Studies Ben Pink Dandelion
University of Birmingham,
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Preface

The research that forms the basis of this book was collected nearly a decade ago. The young people who were interviewed and whose perspectives were canvassed will now be adults, making their way in the world; many of the teachers I spoke with will have retired or moved on to new schools. Despite these facts, the insights gleaned from the data remain highly relevant to our post-pandemic educational context. In fact, in seems to me we need the lessons from the research more than ever: understanding why equality and inclusiveness may have a significant contribution to a learner's capacity to engage with educational opportunities; why creating learning cultures of mutual respect and friendliness improves well-being. Democratic values are under threat across the world; inequalities in access to economic and cultural resources are increasing; hate, intolerance and divisiveness appear to fuel the algorithms of social media; and yet education systems seem stuck on the same old track of pursuing indicators of 'effectiveness' grounded in reductive perspectives of human development and growth. We need to step back and look at schooling from new angles. This book provides one such vantage point.

There is a good reason why the delay in publishing the research was not such a bad thing. Each of the schools were fee-paying independents, where most students gain entrance through the size of their parents' and carers' bank balances. These schools depend for their survival on recruitment and anything that can legitimately be used by their marketing teams to prompt a USP for the schools is valuable. This could have entangled the research

in a species of vicarious conflict of interest, something I particularly wanted to avoid as there had been so little interest by the schools in the research findings when I first reported them. The schools were providing high quality educational experiences, but what I had always been more interested in was what lessons could be drawn from research within them that would be of benefit to learners in less privileged school contexts. This book is a timely opportunity to achieve this goal.

There are two threads that readers will encounter running through the book. One is about the relationships between values, how these are fostered and used to shape school culture, and what influence these may have on learning. There are important findings here, which I hope will help us conceive of curriculum knowledge through a new lens and may lead to rethinking about the importance of relationships, cultures, and the projection of outcome aims within schools. These findings will be of interest to a wide range of readers and have application beyond school and into learning environments within the home and workplace. Here, understanding about Quaker beliefs and worship, I hope will be equally stimulating to readers. However, these findings were only reached through the development and implementation of an appropriate and often innovative methodology. The mention of methodology is unlikely to set many hearts racing, but the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings depends on the processes of data collection and analysis. This story is weaved within the pages of the book in ways that I hope make the decision-making interesting to learn about. There were some novel techniques applied too, particularly in relation to analysis of the interview data, which will be of interest more broadly. Sadly, there was not space to fully discuss the philosophical and theoretical work drawn on to develop the methodology. But there are suggestions to why the epistemology of philosopher of science Michael Polanyi deserves re-examination in relation to social science research.

Young people face huge challenges. Insecurities caused by conflicts, environmental crisis and technological innovations are impacting every corner of the world. Democratic systems of governance, strategies for global development and ambitions to create tolerant and inclusive societies are also under attack. The policy direction of politicians of all colours appears very similar, aimed at increasing educational attainment, young people's employability skills and delivering education more efficiently. I

am yet to be convinced that this is the approach needed. Young people need world saving skills and values, schools need to be communities shaped by *lifeworld* values, not the pressures of market-driven *system* principles, to paraphrase Habermas. The contents of this book, I hope, show why human, *lifeworld* values, are always worth backing.

Cardiff, UK Nigel Newton

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks to the staff and students on the five Quaker schools who participated in the research. They were all very open, helpful, and accommodating. The staff members who were asked to facilitate the research deserve special thanks. I came to them with a list of requirements, principally related to my efforts to sample as randomly as possible within the sampling frames, many of which to fulfil requiring effort and additional work.

The wider Quaker community also provided much help and encouragement, particularly staff at Woodbrooke, school governors and the many Friends I met at meetings, conferences, and forums.

My thanks also to academics at the School of Education, University of Bristol, where I was based while conducting the research, particularly Professor Patricia Broadfoot whose guidance and encouragement throughout the journey of this research was invaluable, along with Professors Guoxing Yu and Ruth Deakin Crick.

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Finally, my heartfelt thanks to my family. We've all been on a learning journey thanks to the research within this book.

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About the Author

Nigel Newton is an academic in Cardiff School of Education & Social Policy, Cardiff Metropolitan University. His research includes work on graduate employment, student course choice, education assessment, school culture, curriculum reform and school governance. His academic writing includes papers on research methods, curriculum knowledge, curriculum reform & theory, and school culture.

Previously, he taught English, Classical Civilisation & World Development mainly in Further Education. For several years, Dr Newton worked on projects using a learning tool developed at the University of Bristol. He has also developed an application to help students choose their post-16 courses and is involved in design of other ed-tech innovations.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

It may sound a contradiction—discovering the importance to learning of the moral value of equality through research in schools that serve, on the whole, a wealthy minority. This tension is even more grating following a pandemic and cost of living crisis that has seen inequalities in the UK increase even further (Smyth & Murray, 2022). The attainment gap between children from more and less advantaged families has grown too, as well-resourced private schools were better prepared and equipped to maintain a relatively high level of support and provision to their students, while many children in more disadvantaged families did not even have access to laptops or the internet (Twist et al., 2022; Tracey et al., 2022). As I will explain, for many members of the Society of Friends, or Quakers as they are happily known, even the existence of 'Quaker' schools is a frustrating paradox. How can a religious movement so committed to equality and inclusion be involved in private schooling that by its very nature primarily serves those with above average financial wealth?

This is just one of the problematic issues this book will have to navigate. Yes, there are many complexities to researching in Quaker schools. Another is the very character of Quaker belief. For some, the idea of researching in these schools suggests the interest will be in religious education or perhaps linked to 'faith schools'. 'Quaker' may make some people think of Cadbury's or Rowntree's chocolate. The chocolate companies are just two

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of the many leading businesses set up by Quakers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, others included Lloyds and Barclays banks and Clarks shoemakers. Some pioneering entrepreneurial Quakers certainly had an influence on attitudes towards education within the Society of Friends. The composition of those leading and governing Quaker schools today is also interesting, and study here could reflect debate about the owners and influencers of the growing number of multi-academy federations. Campaigning for peace and wartime conscientious objection are other issues that often come to people's minds when they think about Quakers. This book is written against the backdrop of war returning to Europe with the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, raising questions about how effectively the West has strengthened and promoted global peace over recent years. Winning wars and preserving peace, as the UK and USA learnt in Iraq and Afghanistan, require distinctive skills, knowledge and dispositions, these rarely promoted in formal education. Many more questions will demand an answer, some will be easy to answer, for example, how many Quaker schools there are. At the time of the research there were eight secondary level schools in England, one has subsequently closed (see Table 1.1). Other questions about what it is like to attend a Quaker school will require a little more space to unpack.

With an estimated figure of only 12,000 Quakers in the UK, it may come as little surprise to learn that fewer than 5% of teachers in the schools participating in the research and no more than 3% of the students identified themselves as coming from a Quaker background or being a Quaker. However, most of the school governors were Quakers. These facts quickly raise more substantive queries about the extent to which a school can claim to have an identity shaped by a specific religious heritage when so few people working and studying within it affiliate with that religion. There can be no simple answer to this, not least because Quaker belief is non-doctrinal, there is no creed, no Quaker symbology and no rituals.

Table 1.1 Quaker secondary schools in England

Ackworth School, Pontefract, North Yorkshire
Breckenbrough School, Near Thirsk, North Yorkshire
Bootham School, York, North Yorkshire
Leighton Park School, Reading, Berkshire
The Mount School, York, North Yorkshire
Sibford School, Banbury, Oxfordshire
Sidcot School, Winscombe, North Somerset

However, this is not to say that Quakerism does not influence beliefs and practices within the schools. On first visiting them, I discovered that if the schools were Quaker in anything more than name, the primary source of influence appeared to be through the practice of Quaker meeting for worship, the communal sitting in silence where anyone can stand and 'minister'. Quakers also profess a handful of 'testimonies' or values which they seek to adhere to and practise, but could things like 'truth', 'peace' and 'equality' be considered distinctive in any way to Quakers and these schools?

The book will be more than a tour of five Quaker schools in England. At its heart is an argument drawn from findings that reveal a relationship between Quaker secondary school students' sense of authentic values within their school environment and their perceptions of themselves as responsible students. Although data can only provide a snap-shot view of students' and their teachers' perspectives, taken during a 12-month period between 2012 and 2013. The findings suggest important lessons can be learnt from these concerning how the values which influence school environments shape the qualities of relationships that can develop, having a significant impact on learning. The research will offer new insights into the interrelated values of equality and inclusiveness and why they may be important to how students engage with the educational opportunities schools provide. However, in this introductory chapter I will first provide some necessary context and explain the background issues which were addressed as the research project developed.

Origins of the Study

I became interested in the ideas of learning motivation during teacher training over 20 years ago. Initially, I was intrigued by the possible relationship between students' goal orientations and outcomes of their academic studies. Significant academic literature on this originates in the work of educational psychologists (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Vansteenkiste et al., 2006) and much of the empirical studies employ quantitative methodologies, assessing goal orientation through analysis of questionnaire data and conducting correlational analysis with other psychometric tests or alongside student grade attainment data (Wolters, 2004; Elliot et al., 2005; Meece et al., 2006). Although this research is robust and often enlightening, it left me questioning what lay beneath students' responses to these kinds of questionnaires and how context affects the way items are

interpreted. As I explored these ideas further in the context of my own teaching, I became aware of other models which sought to explain and assess students' learning motivation. Most notable among these was the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI) which appeared to reflect a more nuanced conceptualisation of learning (Crick et al., 2004; Deakin Crick, 2007) centred around an individual's disposition to behave in certain ways when encountering learning opportunities. However, the ELLI is also a self-report questionnaire and subsequent work I was involved in using it made me further appreciate the importance of taking into account contextual influence on responses to items. Furthermore, some research employing ELLI drew attention to the importance of personal values to an individual's self-efficacy (Deakin Crick et al., 2011; Crick, 2012). This led me to consider how an individual's value-orientation may affect learning motivation.

Understanding learning motivation alongside a students' personal values in relation to their subject interests was another angle I was keen to explore. There is a significant cross-over between research on goal orientation, particularly related to self-determination theory, and research examining students' subject interests within a model of intrinsic and extrinsic orientation (Weber, 2003; Reeve, 2012). Here, research had sought to evaluate whether a student found a programme of study inherently interesting or whether interests were focused primarily on what would be gained through acquisition of curriculum knowledge (qualifications and better employment prospects, etc.). Much of the initial research in this area was similar in design to investigations on goal orientation.

I decided to conduct my own small-scale project to examine the relationship between subject interest and personal values. Firstly, I asked a group of A-Level students[1] to complete a short questionnaire, with items similar to those used in previous research where students rated their level of agreement to statements such as: "I hope this course will improve my future employment prospects"; "I expect to be able to gain a good grade in this course without too much difficulty"; and "I am very interested in the topics I will be studying on this course"; "I hope to gain a good understanding of the subject". Secondly, I interviewed students with their

[1] A-Levels (Advanced Level qualifications) are subject-based qualifications for students aged 16 and above taken by students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The majority of students study three or four A-Levels and these are recognised as one of the main pathways to university entrance in the UK.