

## **Summary Report of Quaker Schools Research Project**

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### ***Introduction***

The Quaker schools research project explored the views of students across 5 Quaker schools in the UK, to investigate their perceptions and experiences of their schools and to examine the relationship between these and students' approaches to learning. The project also sought to explore the ways, if any, students across different Quaker schools experienced a similar authentically Quaker education.

The report will describe the aims of the research and the research activities involved in each of the five stages of the project. Key findings and how the research questions were addressed will also be discussed.

### ***Aims***

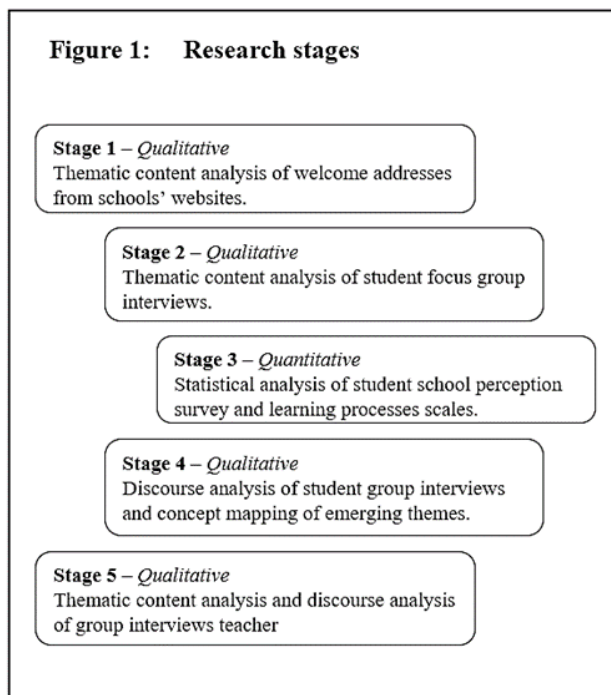
Two concerns guided the research. First, is it possible to identify any features or characteristics of different Quaker schools, primarily from the perspective of students, which could be said to be shared? In relation to this, do the schools' claims to be 'Quaker' hold up in any way? Second, does it matter, in terms of the education students' experience, whether the schools share an 'authentic' Quakerliness? During the initial stage of the research these concerns were formalised into the following research questions:

- 1.0 What are the characteristics of a Quaker school environment?
  - 1.1 Do Quaker schools share cultural characteristics?
- 2.0 What are Quaker school students' perceptions of their school environment?

3.0 Are there any relationships between students' perceptions of their school environment and their approaches to learning?

### ***Research activities and methodology***

The research consisted of an analysis of schools' introductory webpage addresses, conducting interviews and focus groups with over 60 students and 20 teachers in 4 schools, and surveying over 800 students across 5 schools. An exploratory, sequential, mixed methods design was used (see Figure 1). Thematic content analysis, along with statistical analysis and discourse analysis, were applied and data were analysed using a triangulation model. This allowed each set of data to be examined using a grounded theory approach, where



significance emerges from the data itself. An iterative process was applied to produce a map of major themes which appear to relate to each other.

#### *Stage 1 – Schools' website introductory messages*

The websites for ten Quaker schools in the UK and Ireland were reviewed and school prospectuses were read, where available online. Particular attention was paid to the main welcoming message, usually from the Head-teacher found on the websites. These messages were extracted and thematically analysed using NVivo 8. In this process statements within the messages are attributed a conceptual label, forming a code (or node), and any repetition of content sharing the

same or similar semantic value occurring later within texts is placed within this code. These codes are then examined in more detail and checks are made in relation to the accuracy of the code title in reflecting the ideas expressed in the statements placed under each label.

Three major topics were identified, drawing from 43 minor codes, from the welcome messages on the schools' websites. The identification of these topics informed the choices of question themes when preparing for group interviews. Complementing the use of these in forming ideas for questions, one of the schools was also visited and a class of year 8 students were shadowed during a whole school day. Visits to each of the schools where the interviews were to be conducted further developed the focus concerning what issues would be appropriate and relevant to explore in the interviews. During each of these visits detailed notes were taken of observations and informal conversations with students and staff.

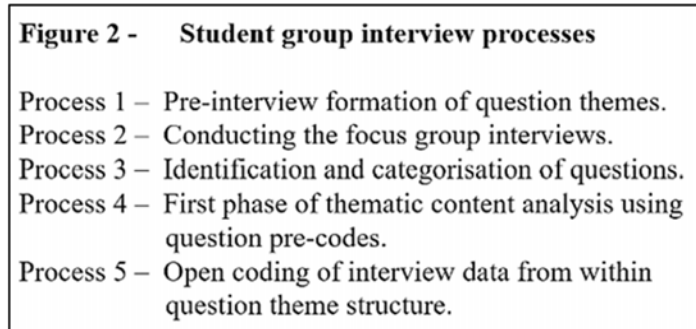
Initially ten themes, listed below, were drawn from this analysis as the basis of questioning during interviews:

Teacher roles; curriculum priorities; outcomes; culture and atmosphere of school; leadership; Quaker values; expectations for students behaviour; relationships throughout school; parents expectations and perspectives; community engagement.

Following the visits to schools two further themes were added to the interview questions: Meeting for Worship (MfW) and extra-curricular activities.

### *Stage 2 – Student interviews*

Three group interviews with students were conducted in four Quaker schools. These were with students from years 8, 9 and 10; five or six students were present in each interview. A total of 68 students were involved in the interviews (45 girls,



30 boys, one of the schools is all-girls). The interviews produced a total of 7 hours, 52 minutes of data. Recordings were transcribed and uploaded to NVivo 8 to facilitate analysis.

**Table 1 - Ten most dominant themes emerging from analysis of student group interview data**

	Sources	Cases	Number of codes grouped within theme
Positive relationships and sense of community	108	126	61
Safe and supportive environment	92	109	49
Strong sense of equality within school	76	111	37
Students' sense of focus on them as individuals	42	55	22
Importance of MfW to students	42	52	19
Concern to develop students' sense of moral purpose	32	39	15
Good cross year and gender relationships	27	34	9
Enjoyment of lessons	20	31	7
Quaker beliefs taught and understood	20	24	12
Small size of school significant in creating environment or not	16	19	9

Five processes were used in stage 2, three of these involving analysis of the data (see Figure 2). The aims were to examine whether students in different Quaker schools shared any common experiences and perceptions of their school and by applying thematic content analysis, allow the data to be condensed and important themes to be identified.

Ten themes emerged from condensing codes identified in the interviews which were found to be common to students in each of the schools and across year groups (see Table 1).

The majority of these themes emerged from a range of question prompts. The students interviewed represented a relatively small sample of students from each school. What was needed next was to examine the extent to which a larger samples of students from Quaker schools shared the perspectives revealed in this data.

### *Stage 3 – Student survey*

The emerging themes identified in stage 2 were used as the basis of creating items for a questionnaire to be administered to students in Quaker schools. The number of items reflected the range of perspectives covered within a theme and the importance of the theme in terms of the number of items coded within it. The form of the items was shaped by the comments made by students, either in direct paraphrase or as composite sentences. As well as demographic questions, students were asked to rate their level of agreement to statements about their

experiences and perspectives of school and their attitudes to learning. The items reflected both the significant and divergent perspectives emerging from the group interviews. 45 items constituted the school environment and ethos perspectives section of the survey.

A 20 item learning process scale (Biggs, 2001, Revised Two Factor Study Process Questionnaire) which measures deep and surface learning motivation was also included in the survey. This was included to provide an indication of possible relationships between students' perceptions of their school environment and their learning motivations.

881 questionnaires were completed by students in 5 schools. However, numbers from one school were very limited and it was decided to remove these data, along with incomplete questionnaires and a handful of others considered extreme outliers; in total 839 cases were considered valid for further analysis. Descriptive statistics were computed, including evaluation of distribution and calculation of demographic data. Principal component analysis and analysis of variance were also used to identify and examine the relationships and patterns within the data.

58% of respondents were male, 42% were female. The percentages across the schools of Day & Boarding pupils were very similar: Day between 70 – 80%, Boarders between 20 – 30%. The majority of students reported no Quaker background, 95.6%. There was some variation between the four schools, with three schools having between 4.2% and 6.6% of students from a Quaker background and one only 1.4%. In relation to religious affiliation: 34.6% described themselves as having no religion; 30.5% as Christian; 20% Atheist/Agnostic; less than 3% other religions (Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh); only 1.1% of students described themselves as Quaker.

The principal component analysis of the school environment and ethos items identified five underlying dimensions in students' perceptions. These were described in the following way to reflect the characteristics of the items loading unto each component:

- 1) Expectations and relational culture (ERC)

- 2) Meeting for Worship and use of silence (MWS)
- 3) Learning and talking about Quaker beliefs (LTQ)
- 4) Small school size (SSS)
- 5) Low anxiety and community environment (LAC)

These dimensions were used to group items and allow comparison between students' perceptions of their school and deep (DL) and surface learning (SL), the two dimensions measured with the study process questionnaire. The deep and surface learning questionnaire can be described as measuring characteristics of the learning motivation of students at the time of completion. Surface learners are thought to be more extrinsically motivated, they look for the easiest route to attain a good grade, focus is placed only on learning material considered likely to appear in examinations, and knowledge is generally encountered in a fragmented way. Deep learners are thought to be more intrinsically motivated, they want to understand a topic for its own sake, they are more likely to read around a subject and study material not explicitly prescribed by a teacher.

#### *Stage 4 – Second analysis of student group interviews*

How should the significant perceptual relationships between aspects of school experience be understood? What is the nature of the relationship between students' perceptions of their school experience and their approach to learning? In order to address these questions data from the group interviews was re-examined using different analytical methods. With many perspectives apparently intercorrelating, it was important to analyse the group interview data using methods capable of allowing students' voices to shape the interpretations of the statistical survey findings; to make visible attributes of students' opinions and ideas which statistical analysis could not reflect. One of the challenges was that just as there appeared to be latent variables which influenced students' responses to the survey items, seen through the principle component analysis and correlation analysis, there may well have been values which influenced students' responses to questions in the group interviews which were not made explicit.

The second analysis of the interview data needed to identify the possible inter-relationships between ideas and the concepts shaping them, while not forcing values onto students' discourses which were not there. The methods applied involved looking at extracts of student discourse from the interviews that were assigned to codes which later emerged as dominant during stage 2. What prompted students to mention things and what other ideas appeared present in these extracts? Employing techniques drawn from conversation analysis, particularly adjacency pair and topic organisation analysis, the exploration looked at ways discussion moved from topic to topic as students responded to questions and each other's comments. In this way, interrelationships between ideas in students' perceptions became clearer and it is through these relationships that latent values emerged.

#### *Stage 5 – Teacher group interviews*

Group interviews with teachers were conducted in the four schools where interviews with students had also taken place. Five teachers attended each interview. They represented a cross-section of subjects, levels of experience and time in at the school. In total there was just under three hours of interview data with teachers (178 minutes).

Teachers form an important role in shaping and influencing school culture. Understanding their perspectives on the school communities to which they and students belong is important. Analysis of their comments about similar topics to those asked students allowed an alternative perspective to be brought to bear on themes emerging elsewhere in the research. Consideration of differing perspectives on the same phenomena or ideas has been seen throughout the project as a means of helping to reveal underlying perceptual values. Teachers' comments also provided an opportunity to verify aspects of students' comments and the analytical interpretation provided in previous stages.

Three processes were followed in the analysis of the teacher interviews: content coding in relation to the question topics asked; thematic open coding of each transcript and review of this in relation

to question topics (Table 2 provides a list of the themes emerging from this analysis); conversation analysis (identification of topic schemes) and discourse analysis. In order to avoid imposing a preconceived conceptual model concerning the nature or structure of the contexts influencing teachers' perceptions, selection of discourse and analysis was guided by reference to the following criteria: that it was drawn from within conversation schemes where topics relating to the themes being focused on were present;

Theme name	Sources	References
Supportive & safe environment	33	65
Quaker teaching and testimonies	24	36
Focus on the individual	23	51
Similar to other schools	17	24
Inclusiveness	16	33
Meeting for Worship important	13	18
Leadership more open and less hierarchical	11	25
Achievement not just measured by results	6	16
Not like other schools - including private school self-selection	5	14
Difficult to know if Quakerism influences culture	3	4

that analysis respected the importance of concepts, as they emerged in terms of frequency, from the open coding. The themes which formed the primary focus of concern related to findings from the previous stage (stage 4), where students' interviews had been analysed with a view to interpreting the relationships found between emergent themes and constructs drawn from the survey data (stage 3). Consequently, this analysis can be seen as forming the last step in a process of triangulation.

## Key Findings

### *Stage 1 – Descriptions of schools*

Three topics appeared to structure the welcoming addresses found on Quaker schools' websites: description of core beliefs and values within the life of the school; a description of the environment of the school and how it can be characterised; and mention of the schools' aims and desired outcomes for students.

The majority of schools identify as important recognising the individual and honouring the value of equality. These ideas were often expressed using the phrase, "Something of God in everyone", which was explicitly or implicitly related to Quaker belief. Many schools described seeking to create an environment characterised by positive relationships and a sense of community. The most commonly mentioned school aims were for the academic success of students. However, many schools also referred to students' personal development more generally, often described in terms of a sense of self-worth and self-awareness. Alongside this, several schools described seeking to develop in students a deeper sense of values and ethics.

### *Stage 2 – Perspectives of students*

A high degree of coherence was noted between several themes emerging from analysis of the school website addresses and from analysis of students' comments about their school. Students appeared to speak with freedom and candour during the interviews and emergent themes arose from items of discourse prompted by a range of questions. These factors make the degree of coherence, particularly in relation to the importance of equality and concern within schools for students' moral development, all the more noteworthy.

Data from the teacher interviews (stage 5) also supported this finding, although emerging through a different perceptual focus. During analysis of the open coding of teachers' comments, codes relating to equality had been placed under the broader heading of 'Quaker teaching and testimony' and codes relating to students' moral development were placed under several headings: 'Inclusiveness', 'Supportive & safe environment', and 'Focus on the individual'.

### *Stage 3 – Relationships for learning*

There were significant correlations between students' 'Deep Learning' (DL) scores and three school perception scales, 'Expectations and relational culture' (ERC), 'Meeting for Worship and use of silence' (MWS), and 'Low anxiety and community environment' (LAC), with the first two scales this was  $>0.4$  and with LAC  $>0.2$ . There was a significant negative correlation between 'Surface Learning' (DL) and ERC, MWS and LAC ( $>0.2$ ) (see Table 3).

		Mean Deep Learning	Mean Surface Learning
Expectations and relational culture	Pearson Correlation	.418**	-.238**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000
	N	551	551
Meeting for Worship and use of silence	Pearson Correlation	.401**	-.238**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000
	N	732	732
Learning and talking about Quaker beliefs	Pearson Correlation	.118**	-.106**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.004
	N	742	742
Small school size	Pearson Correlation	.070	-.018
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.053	.615
	N	762	762
Low anxiety and community environment	Pearson Correlation	.271**	-.289**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000
	N	689	689

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The strength of the correlations varied between schools. The two schools showing the strongest correlation coefficients between DL, ERC and MWS, also showed a significant correlation (>0.2) between DL and 'Learning and talking about Quaker beliefs' (LTQ). How students responded to items concerning their perceptions of the small size of school showed no significant relationship to either DL or SL. The strength of the correlation between DL/SL and ERC, MWS and LAC was greatest with students from years 8, 9 and 10. The correlations between DL/SL and ERC and MWS were stronger with Day pupils than with Boarders. Day pupils also recorded a significant correlation between DL/SL and 'Learning and talking about Quaker beliefs' (LAC) which was not present with Boarders.

The data suggest that correlations between students' perceptions of school and their approach to learning was influenced by factors within the schools rather than because of the personality traits of students. However, the statistical analysis could not explain why there might be a relationship between several aspects of a Quaker school environment and students' approach to learning. For this reason, it was important to return to the student interview data as a means of examining conceptual and perceptual relationships.

#### *Stage 4 – Important values*

Stage 4 analysis of student group interview data identified several important values which appear to matter to many students within the Quaker schools, namely: friendliness; trust, respect; community; individual identity; and, equality. These values have similar characteristics in each of the schools, despite the presence of other differences between the schools, and seem to influence other factors which play an important role in shaping the experiences of students within school: relationships with peers and teachers; the quality of communication students experience with others; being responsible to others and for themselves; having moral as well as educational aspirations for their development; practising tolerance; appreciating reflection; being autonomous learners.

It was also possible to observe how the Quaker testimony of equality appeared to influence many aspects of students' perceptions of their school and their identity within it; it is the value which appears most likely to explain the relationship between students' school perceptions and how they scored on the approaches to learning dimensions.

Figure 3 presents a concept map seeking to visualise the relationships between significant perceptual factors. The map highlights the complex ways in which perspectives and practices within the schools may reinforce or restrict significant values. The relationships can be described in the following manner:

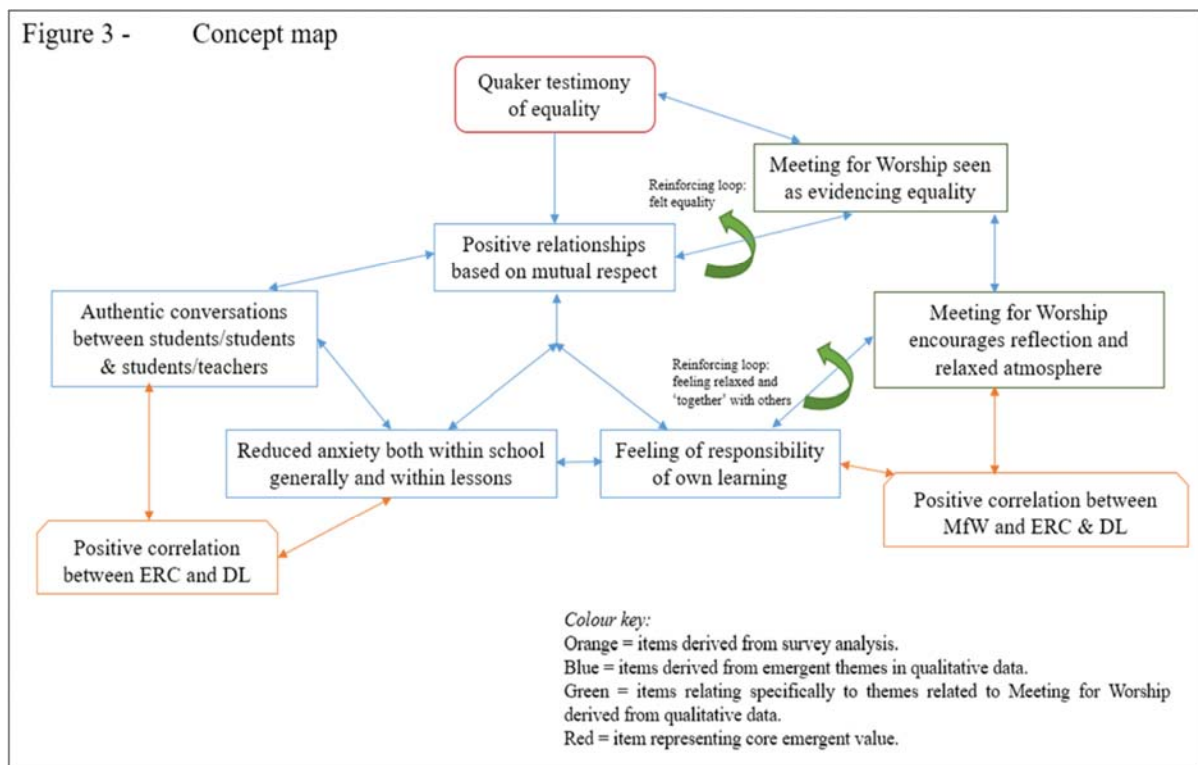
Friendly relationships create strong bonds of trust, grounded in mutual respect. Students recognise teachers as supportive. Opportunities for open conversations exist between students and teachers. Students feel an increased sense of responsibility for their learning because of the quality of relationships they have with their teachers. The Quaker testimony of equality appears to shape how many interpersonal relationships are perceived.

MfW is seen to provide opportunity to reflect, contributing to the relaxed atmosphere of

school. It is also considered as confirming the place of students' voices and importance of community within school.

Students feel they can be themselves without anxiety. They feel supported to do the best they can, but this 'best' is not reduced to examination performance. There is a strong emphasis on students developing moral character.

These themes appear to link the importance of equality and recognition of the individual. The two principles act to reinforce the feeling of community and supportiveness, on the one hand, and a sense of responsibility towards others and one's own behaviour, on the other hand.



### Stage 5 – Teachers' testimony

Analysis of the teacher interviews provided a helpful means to assess the accuracy of interpretations from previous stages of the research. Overall, none of their comments contradicted any of the findings from the student data. Teachers did acknowledge the difficulty of

evaluating the relationship between Quaker influenced aspects of their practice and of the environment of the school and those emerging because of other factors, particularly the relatively small independent nature of the schools. However, emerging from the analysis of their interviews were important themes which were coherent with the concept map created in stage 4 and added to the validity of the interpretations underpinning it.

Teachers recognised the positive relationships based on mutual respect between teachers and students, and more generally throughout the school; being able to be an individual within the school, was also said to be experienced by many teachers as well as students. These factors were seen as encouraging an atmosphere where opinions could be expressed and individuals felt safe. Teachers acknowledged the high degree of support they provide students, and while recognising that the relatively high teacher/student ratio within the schools contributed to this, they also felt that the openness students felt to approach them facilitated the help they could provide. The importance of the testimony of equality was also evident in teachers' discussions about their schools.

Teachers' conversations showed the significant role Meeting for Worship plays in the life of the schools and the experiences of students. It was referred to as a space in which students experienced the values of their school, particularly in relation to the freedom to participate and see everyone as equal. It was also felt to contribute to creating a sense of community and encouraging mutual respect.

The focus on providing a holistic education, one not defined principally in terms of examination performance, emerged strongly from the teacher interviews. Many comments referred to teachers' sense of freedom to teach students as individuals, without feeling pressured to reduce assessment of their role to how students perform in exams. However, teachers acknowledged the importance of academic attainment, not least in relation to pressures their schools feel from parents and through existing in a competitive independent school environment.

The findings from the teacher interviews also drew attention to what can be described as threats to the Quaker school environment. These can be summarised as the following:

Tension between parental expectations in relation to academic performance, influencing senior management, and their school's aim to provide an authentically holistic education;

Maintaining a strong ethos of mutual respect, linked to freedom to speak one's opinions in a safe atmosphere, seen as potentially threatened by more hierarchical approaches to school leadership.

It is worth noting that students also expressed concerns mirroring these.

### ***Addressing the research questions***

Stages 2 and 3 provided strong evidence that, from the perspective of student experience, there are shared characteristics of the Quaker schools in the project. Themes emerged from student data, qualitative and quantitative, across schools, year groups, and other demographic groupings. Furthermore, the highest mean scored items within each scale from the questionnaire were very similar across the schools.

Findings from stage 4 developed and expanded the insights on students' perceptions of their school environment emerging from stages 2 and 3. They provided stronger evidence of the particular characteristics of Quaker schools experienced by students. The analysis also complements the findings from stage 3 concerning the relationships between students' perceptions of their school environment and their approaches to learning. These findings were confirmed by analysis of teachers' interviews in stage 5. The research reveals how several factors, linking back to Quaker testimony and practice, may contribute to student agency, lack of anxiety in relation to study and their ability to make the most of the support their teachers offer.

## Conclusions

The overall conclusion of this research project is thus that Quaker schools are *authentically* Quaker. It is clear that the shared Quaker values translate into a learning environment in which students feel they are respected and listened to. This in turn helps to create positive relationships with teachers which results in a greater orientation towards 'deep-learning'.

Although this was a relatively small-scale study, the combination of different sources of data generated and the variety of analytical approaches used means that considerable weight can justifiably be placed on the insights it has generated.

Quaker schools are clearly special. Not only do the results of this study offer a valuable endorsement of their approach; they also have important insights to offer to the wider education community.

At a time when the focus on raising academic achievement in schools is becoming an increasingly single-minded preoccupation of many schools, this study suggests that empowering learners through the creation of a climate of mutual trust and respect, may ultimately be more important in both promoting genuine learning and producing young people equipped to cope effectively with the challenges of the future.