

Quaker Values in Education

Written evidence submitted to the **Education Select Committee Inquiry : The Purpose and Value of Education in England.**

The submission is by the **Quaker Values in Education Group, a listed informal group of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain.** The committee will have received a further submission from the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, the umbrella body which represents all Quakers in Britain..

Executive summary

- i. All are equal and there is a spiritual dimension in everyone. All individuals can seek for, and base their actions on, the deepest truths they can find.
- ii. The purpose of education is the pursuit of learning, knowledge and questioning in the service of realising our full human potential in an ever-changing world
- iii. The fruits of education include: discernment, creativity, cooperation, spirituality, moral autonomy and peace.
- iv. Through an economic lens, education needs to nurture invention, innovation, and adaptability and these are achieved through a truth-seeking education that develops inquiry, communication, collaboration and creativity as well as respect for knowledge, and ways of questioning knowledge.
- v. Literacy and a broadly agreed body of useful and culturally shared facts, skills and knowledge is an important aspect of equality of experience, but narrow testing and retesting of these skews a child's experience of growing up and is not a true account of learning and development
- vi. Often it is those most disadvantaged already who find it hardest to learn in school, and who most need opportunities to engage in the arts, sports, and respectful one-to-one interaction with caring adults. Current accountability regimes mean that those schools under most pressure are least likely to be able to provide this broad education for all, thus perpetuating disadvantage and contributing to alienation.
- vii. It is necessary to attend to the quality of teaching workload as well as its quantity, so that teaching enables them to act with care and respect to each other and to their pupils and to their subject

1. Introduction: Quakers and education

1.1 Quakers (formally known as the Religious Society of Friends) have a long-standing concern for education within our significant and well-known record of working for social justice and alleviating poverty, conflict and distress, and alongside the significant historical contribution made by Quakers to entrepreneurial and intellectual life, in the sciences as well as arts and humanities. Quaker concerns arise from the fundamental belief in the equality of all in the light of God. This means that everyone has the potential and right to live a good life, the capability to seek and minister about truth, and the responsibility to uphold others and alleviate suffering.

1.2 Currently, there exist a few Quaker-governed independent schools in England and in Northern Ireland but the teachers, pupils and leadership are rarely themselves Quakers - the present submission does not arise from our connection with those schools although Quaker thinking about education is manifested in their stated aims and values.

1.3 In contrast, during the 1990s 30% of the Quakers in England were or had been employed within the state education system. Currently, about 45% of Quakers are involved in education in some way, whether as students, teachers or governors. For the last two centuries there have been various education societies within British Quakerism as the need arises; the current group, Quaker Values in Education, has formed during the last three years to reflect increased concern about the experiences of pupils and teachers within the state funded system in England. This submission draws on the history of Quaker thought about education, and a recent long process of discernment among Quakers. It should not be taken to represent the views of all individual Quakers.

1.4 This submission addresses the overall purpose of the state funded education system in England. The select committee will also have received a submission from the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, focussing principally on peace education and militarisation. In this submission we focus on values of equality and truth.

2. History of Quakers and education

2.1 Quaker concern for education originally took the form of:

- ensuring literacy, so that everyone could learn directly about Christian teaching in the Bible and relate it to their experience without the need for priestly interpretation;
- providing basic education for poor Quaker children so that they might be uplifted out of poverty;
- providing a well rounded education to develop the intellectual capacity to seek truth and to act with and for others

This led to the foundation of Quaker schools which also provided a separate education in Quakerism to enable the continuation of its values and communities.

2.2 Through the realisation that teachers need professional education, Quakers founded some early teacher training colleges. During the 19th century Quakers were strongly involved in the Adult School movement and education of prisoners. During the 20th century many Quakers were, and still are, attracted to the teaching profession within the state funded system as a service and caring profession for all.

3. Quaker Values in Education

3.1 In this submission we are focusing on values of equality and truth. In the other Quaker submission we focus principally on peace.

3.2 Quakers all share the fundamental belief that all are equal and there is a spiritual dimension in everyone. Therefore all actions should be based on equal respect for all individuals. We also believe that all individuals can seek for, and base their actions on, the deepest truths they can find. These two commitments to equality and truth have implications for education.

3.3 The purpose of education is the pursuit of learning, knowledge and questioning in the service of realising our full human potential in an ever-changing world. This includes but is not confined to the ability and willingness to contribute to society through work or service. As well as knowledge its fruits include: discernment, creativity, cooperation, spirituality, moral autonomy, motivation and peace. Its outcome for a diverse society would be a fairness, justice and a good society.

3.4 For children, as for adults, living and learning are intimately intertwined and for children most of this takes place in school in term-time in formal school. This is why we want schools to be places where all people matter, where they thrive through relationships and where the whole person can be affirmed. People flourish best in an all-embracing culture of encouragement, nurture and compassion for teachers, children and young people.

3.5 Schools also need to nurture the search for, the questioning of, and respect for, truths including deep truths about all dimensions of human life as well as experiential and knowledge-based truths.

4. Matching Quaker values to current legislation

4.1 Some of those early reasons for providing education would resonate with the aspirations of recent governments: all should be literate and education can alleviate poverty.

4.2 A narrow set of these values are recognised in current legislation: that schools and teachers should have similar expectations of all children whatever their background; that all children should have access to the same knowledge-base; that all children should have the opportunity to pass the same examinations at the same range of achievements; that opportunities should not be limited and determined by birth circumstances.

5. Current obstacles to the values of equality and truth

5.1 In the current education system in this country legislation in England the values of equality and truth are not being pursued in ways that care for individual pupils, teachers, leaders nor for truth and development of the intellectual and spiritual tools for life. In accountability measures these are treated as optional extras that schools can adopt in their own ways if they wish. This means that schools under most academic pressure are least likely to be able to develop breadth in their work, and least likely to have the time and opportunity to help pupils learn to seek and discern truth.

5.2 Pupils are measured frequently in a variety of ways related to narrow achievement of procedural or factual knowledge, particularly in primary school, without recognition of the development of other aspects of human life. The valuable work that primary schools do in enabling very young children to become sociable, active, reliable, innovative, thoughtful and communicative people is not recognised in the formal inspection and assessment regimes, nor are children's achievements across the full range of human potential formally valued. Where schools and teachers are threatened by measures that only recognise a narrow range of factual and procedural capabilities, they are in an impossible position of

tension between the human needs of their pupils, and their own human needs, and the imposed measures.

5.3 Teachers and school leaders who work in an atmosphere of potential blame and fear often develop mental health problems; retention problems in the profession as a whole challenge the provision of stable and wise environments within which pupils can flourish with continuity of teaching, care and mentoring. While this government knows about workload issues in terms of hours and bureaucratic requirements, it is also necessary to attend to the quality of workload as well as its quantity, because teachers and others need to feel that their work is worthwhile, and that teaching enables them to act with care and respect to each other and to their pupils and to their subject.

5.4 Adherence to an agreed body of useful and culturally shared facts, skills and knowledge is an important aspect of equality of experience, but narrow testing and retesting skews a child's experience of growing up. Furthermore, such narrow testing is not a true account of learning and development.

5.5 The common body of knowledge needs to be agreed and widely shared within education, society and learned societies rather than imposed in response to political need and contested ideology. Historically, one feature of rebellion has been the contested nature of imposed 'truths'.

5.6 Often it is those most disadvantaged already who find it hardest to learn in school, and who also need the most nurturing in a broader sense such as opportunities to engage in the arts, sports, and respectful one-to-one interaction with caring adults. All children need the latter in order to benefit from the former, and many do not get these aspects of upbringing in their lives apart from in formal school contexts.

6. The purpose of education

6.1 The above statements assume broad aims for education, not merely for people to become units of economic value through employment and consumption. For the development of a fair, just and good society the purpose of education funded by a nation should include: knowledge, discernment, creativity, cooperation, spirituality, moral autonomy and peace. Even seen solely through an economic lens, education needs to nurture invention, innovation, and adaptability and these are achieved through a truth-seeking education that develops inquiry, communication, collaboration and creativity as well as respect for knowledge, and ways of questioning knowledge.

7. Advice for the Select Committee

7.1 While most of this statement offers views that are not time-specific, we have discerned imperatives for transformation of the current state of education in England so that these purposes can be achieved:

- i. *Equality*: education should not be a traded commodity, subject to market-place philosophies, but a human endeavour in which people come first. Learners are beneficiaries of education, not consumers nor economic units. Learning is a long process of becoming a well-rounded person with useful and fulfilling capabilities, not a one-size-fits-all pathway through tightly defined and measured steps. The

Committee could question how the system supports and encourages human flourishing, particularly in areas of, and for children with, significant background disadvantage.

- ii. *Truth*: The professional knowledge of teachers, learned societies, and research on how children learn should have a significant role in deciding what is of value and in driving educational change. The Committee could question whether the current curriculum and testing proposals reflect the nature of the subject, its societal and personal value, and its methods of inquiry and use, and its contribution to the full development of children.
- iii. *Equality and Truth*: Assessment, inspection and accountability regimes should be humane and nurturing and recognise a breadth of disciplinary and other experience necessary for the realisation of full human potential, in addition to identifying inadequate provision. The Committee could question whether and how much the systems for accountability, with their short-term targets and changing goalposts, effectively define the enacted purpose of education for all children, or effectively limit it for groups that are already under-resourced and disadvantaged.

on behalf of the Quaker Values in Education Group

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Anne Watson".

Anne Watson

20.1.15