



This article first appeared on educationreview.com.au



Nelson File with Friends' School Students

A Friends' Legacy: Quakerism and High Achieving in Hobart

A guiding document and a lasting tradition inform the experience of children throughout Australia's only Quaker school.

Once a week, all students and staff at The Friends' School in Hobart experience silence during a replication of the traditional Quaker gathering, a time of stillness and reflection and a sense of being present in everyday life. While early-years students might manage five or six minutes by end of year, at most, senior school classes sit for 35–40 minutes in silent gatherings. The silence may be framed by a theme of significant matters in the lives of students or world issues. The Quaker community coordinator assists staff and students in planning these events. The gatherings' practices of silence and mindfulness, which are also taught in classes, encourage stillness of the mind – an important quality for life at the school.

The discipline of silence is part of the “desirability of simplicity and the need to establish peace and justice” states the *Purpose and Concerns* document that guides every aspect of the school. It focuses on the education of the whole person and the learning community:

“We seek to help our students develop as people who will think clearly, act with integrity, make decisions for themselves, be sensitive to the needs of others and the environment, be strong in service and hold a global perspective,” the document states.

The Friends' School is Australia's only Quaker school. Nelson File has been principal there for nearly four years. The school was established in 1887 with a vision of an education for "spiritual and intellectual growth". The independent, co-educational institution incorporates a small boarding component. Enrolments from the primary school to Year 12 sit at 1300 and include 35 international students. A relatively large proportion of students come from families who have had members of the community at The Friends' School for two or more generations.

The school is situated on two campuses about 10 minutes' walk from each other. The boarding school is on one site, along with three sub-schools: Friends Early Years; Kinder to Year 6; and Clemes, which is the school for year 11–12 students. The High School, for years 7–10, and school administration are on the second campus. Although the two locations present a physical gulf, there are ways to bring staff and students together. Staff members meet as a whole once a term and other structures bring them together in faculties and year levels.

The Friends' School offers two international baccalaureate (IB) courses: all students from kinder to Year 6 participate in the IB Primary Years Programme, and students in years 11 and 12 can choose to study the International Baccalaureate Diploma. Students and staff are also offered ways to participate in service as a means of engaging with the community, consistent with the Quaker ethos "to let their lives speak". Age-appropriate activities range from options in the school and local community to service through international organisations such as the United Nations Youth Association and Oxfam.

The school takes care to uphold elements of the Quaker tradition. *Purpose and Concerns*, developed 25 years ago, assists students, staff and parents in developing an understanding of Quakerism in practice. File explains that while there are not large numbers of Quakers: "We have many friends of Quakerism on staff and the *Purpose and Concerns* supports us all to uphold beliefs and principles that have guided the school. We use it for staff professional learning. We also benefit by watching short videos on Quaker practice produced in the United States, as resources to spark discussion." There is a staff exchange program for teachers from the school that enables teachers to spend two weeks in Quaker schools in the US and vice-versa, and this experience provides practical knowledge of history, traditions and practices.

Leadership and tradition

File began his career in education at a Quaker school in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in the US, and spent extended periods teaching in schools in Africa, India and Oman. His decision to take on leadership was guided by "a strong interest in knowing I could help a wider range of students and support teachers to educate in the Friends tradition".

In the Quaker tradition, leadership is based on distributed decision-making in the community. File explains: "It's important to achieve wide participation in decisions, with the understanding that everyone has equal opportunity to contribute."

Individuals stand aside if they disagree and accept the decision of the community. At The Friends' School, there is a flat leadership structure and staff have opportunities to take responsibility for different areas. Heads of school operate in the primary and

senior schools, and in the high school, four co-heads share pastoral care and leadership responsibilities for houses. Recently, a new role, director of teaching and learning, was created to strengthen the integration of primary and school curriculum and assist with developing pedagogy and assessment across the school.

At all levels, students are encouraged to take on leadership. Year 6 students work with younger children and oversee activities at recess times. In the high school, Year 10 students demonstrate leadership through activities such as organising the 2016 Health Forum. They present workshops to Year 8 students and this year the five workshop sessions were related to the theme, 'You are your choices'. The High School Council, a group of elected student representatives, helps plan the programs, including guest speakers for assemblies held up to four times a term.

Students in years 11 and 12 are elected to the Clemes Council, whose wellbeing representatives organise sessions that promote positive health in the school environment, and apply guidelines and standards from *Purpose and Concerns*. The voluntary service of the International Baccalaureate program also encourages students to participate in the school and wider community. A newspaper, *Focus*, is written, edited and produced by students, with teacher assistance, and is published three times a year. It provides the basis of a Year 12 media production course.

Wellbeing

Teachers and students address each other using first names, which reflects the inclusive culture and provides the basis for developing supportive relationships throughout the school. Parents see the focus on silence and reflection as part of wellbeing. More than 60 co-curricular programs offer students the chance to participate in areas of interest including sport, music, service and enrichment. These promote a sense of belonging and participation in a community. A vertical tutor group system in the high school incorporates students from each of years 7–10. A similar structure exists in Clemes, the senior school. The weekly class gatherings are often used as an opportunity to discuss a theme related to mental health and wellbeing, followed by reflection.

File says staff have expressed concern about the increase of anxiety and depression in students compared with 10 or so years ago. "It is troubling to see teenagers struggling," he says. "We see that it is important to counter the difficulties with support and hope. It is essential for adults to portray a message of hope and growth, which we want to promote through our relationships, curriculum, and all our practices at Friends."

Over the past few years, an extensive range of staff workshops has included topics such as wellbeing and information and communication technology, mindfulness, positive psychology with Martin Seligman, gratitude and mental health first aid units. KidsMatter Primary, implemented with support from Principal Australia Institute's (PAI) Tasmanian office, was a basis for designing the social and emotional wellbeing scope and sequence that has been developed within the Primary School. PAI chief executive Paul Geyer recognises the important work of supporting the wellbeing of students at The Friends' School and within school communities across Australia.

"I believe staff play a fundamental role in providing a nurturing and safe learning environment for all students in primary and secondary schools," Geyer says. "PAI delivers KidsMatter, [which is] a mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention initiative set in primary schools and in early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. The KidsMatter framework assists schools [at putting] evidence-based strategies in place to support the mental health needs of their community. It was developed by experts in mental health, education and early childhood, in response to troubling figures relating to children's mental health and the growing national call for action."

Quakerism reflected back

More than half the 13-member board of governors is composed of Quakers, the rest are current and past parents of students at the school. One of its roles is to monitor the impact of the institution. Biennial surveys of students, staff and parents provide a measurement of the efficacy of the *Purpose and Concerns*. In 2014, the school invited old scholars to respond to a survey about their experience of Friends, and whether its philosophical foundations had made an impact on their lives. More than 500 scholars responded, and 90 per cent of their comments were positive or neutral. The following statement highlights what has provided a basis for one former student's life beyond Friends: "Finding good in each individual, appreciating difference, living simply and being careful with material resources, a concern for world peace and justice, an interest in international relations and other cultures, a sense of the importance of community".

Challenges and hopes

File's challenges reflect those experienced by every other principal leading a school, with all its contemporary complexities in areas of governance, overseeing staffing, shaping curriculum, meeting the needs of students and families, maintaining facilities, managing finances and planning for the future. File refers to the tough economic climate of Tasmania and understands the financial sacrifice parents make to send their children to The Friends' School. He also knows that many parents are concerned about the future, which they see as uncertain and challenging for young people.

"My hopes are that the Quaker tradition prepares students to think clearly, act with integrity and work constructively with others in the community," File says. "I'd like each student to be open to learning and know how to learn. This approach seems to run counter to the focus on ATAR or NAPLAN results. Above all, I'd like students to have a passion for learning, and feel a deep curiosity about others, life and its possibilities, and to understand how they can be positive, contributing members of society."

Madeleine Regan is a writer for the Principals Australia Institute.