

Friends Council
Education

Chronicles

OF QUAKER EDUCATION

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Students with Learning Differences: The Quaker Impact

Friends' commitment to equality and acceptance of differences has been a cornerstone of Quakerism since the early beginnings of the Religious Society of Friends. Many Friends schools have tried to incorporate this testimony into the very fabric of their schools. However, there are some schools that are devoted exclusively to serving students with differences -- learning differences. How does Quakerism inform the work of these schools? Does a Friends school for children with learning differences have anything additional to offer their students? What are the implications for Friends schools, in general, which often have students with learning differences mainstreamed into the general population of students?

Delaware Valley Friends School (DVFS) was started by a group of Quaker educators as a "felt need" and a concern for adolescents who were not succeeding in schools. It is the only Friends high school for students with learning differences and serves children from grades 7 through 12. "There is a profound connection between Quakerism and teaching kids with learning differences," reported Ruth Greenberger, head of school. "What this school is about is listening as hard as we can to each student to determine how they learn and then honoring that. We honor how their brains work and then teach them to honor that in themselves."

The heart of the program at DVFS is metacognition, teaching kids how they learn, and secondly, self-advocacy, teaching students how to advocate for themselves by telling teachers what they need in order to succeed. Because many students have been unsuccessful in previous schools, they come to DVFS with feelings of low self-worth. The faculty makes a concerted effort to help the kids use the self-knowledge about their learning styles to create self-confidence, which, in turn, builds self-esteem. Each student has an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) that is used by students, parents, and teachers to examine both areas of strength and areas of difficulty in which the student needs to focus.

Giving the students an understanding of learning differences is built into the curriculum. In seventh grade, students take a course entitled "What's My Style?," offered by the school psychologist and the language arts teachers, in which students study learning styles. In human biology, ninth-grade students study the human brain. Their major research project is to study their own brain, using current research on how people learn. "Because all the students are working on understanding their own learning styles, the stigma is removed," explained Ruth. "Our students see themselves as normal."

Gray Goodman, director of Athletics and head of the Social Studies Department, has been at the school almost since its beginning. "Irene McHenry, our founding head, looked at how other schools for students with learning differences operated," Gray recalled. "She found that for the most part these schools focused on what the students did not do well. We focus on what the kids do well. This is truly honoring that of God in each child. In return, we get a lot more from the students in terms of effort and motivation."

Heidi Hammel was the first teacher hired. Her mission was to create an outdoor experiential education program. "Our students need to experience success," remarked Heidi. "The academic part of school is

hard for them; they have to work for everything they get. In the non-academic curriculum, we give the students life and social skills." Students between 9th and 12th grades pick from one of four electives each year: ropes, rock climbing, backpacking, and bicycling. They learn time management, goal-setting, problem-solving, and organization of belongings, which is often a problem for children with learning differences. Heidi continued, "Our students tend to be risk-averse because of their repeated failures. In the Outdoor Ed Program, we encourage them to take small risks, step by step. The experience also gives them a chance to build relationships with teachers in a completely different way. Hopefully, the students will take all this learning back into the classroom."

Another unique aspect to DVFS is the all-school meeting for business, clerked by students. "The meeting for business is a great way to solve problems in the school," said Ruth. "The students are given voice and learn to take responsibility for the community in which they live. This is the first time many of our students feel like a respected member of a community." Matt Azarva and Ian Brady, both seniors, are the current co-clerks of the meeting for business. "It can be a lot of work and stress," remarked Matt. "Ian and I both realize that to clerk the business meeting takes a lot of preparation. Anything can happen in the meeting. I think students here are lucky to have an opportunity to participate in helping to solve the problems of the school." Some of the issues that the school has dealt with are dress code, sexual harassment, off campus lunch, and computer privileges.

What advice does the Delaware Valley Friends School have to give to other schools who have students with learning differences? Roxanne Hewitt, dean of Faculty, clarified, "There is no special trick to the teaching we do here. We basically follow good teaching practices. You have to find ways to teach using multi-sensory tools -- visual, aural, kinesthetic, lots of field trips. There are many ways to get into the student's brain. Find out how the student learns best and go with that."

Ruth added, "There is a dimension to this school that everyone on the planet needs -- respect and honor as individuals. Quaker practices support kids in their growth." Gray agreed. "I believe that the emphasis in this school on the spiritual inward journey helps our students to gather the strength they need to overcome past failures and to do the work needed in order to move toward future successes."

Susan Weiner had a child at Brooklyn Friends School and another child with learning differences. In the early 1980s, there was no independent school at all in Brooklyn for children with learning differences. Susan went to the head of Brooklyn Friends School and asked for help. The head, FCE's very own Kay Edstene, offered encouragement and assistance. Brooklyn Friends Monthly Meeting offered to share space in the meetinghouse. The Mary McDowell Center for Learning opened in 1984 with five students.

Now the school has 82 students, ages 5 to 12, and will be moving into its own building in the Fall of 1999. How do Quaker beliefs impact the school? "Meeting for worship is the center of our school," explained Debbie Zlotowitz, head of school. "Every Monday and Friday, we meet in the meetingroom for meeting for worship; on the other days of the week, meeting takes place in the classroom. We introduce a query on Monday and the students work on it during the week."

Christine Irwin, a teacher, added, "Though many of the children have language problems, it is amazing how articulate they can be. Even if it takes a student awhile to get out what they want to say, the community waits for them." Mark Doty, another teacher, remarked, "The Brooklyn meetingroom is part of our community and gives us a sense of our Quaker heritage. The kids feel safe and comforted in that room." Mark laughed. "The students take meeting for worship very seriously. I gave a message in meeting that was slightly humorous. I was eluded by a student. She said, 'This is not the time or the place for humor.'"

"Quakerism is embracing of differences," remarked Christine. "These students learn differently and

that is okay. Our students come from other schools where they were unsuccessful. Here if they are not learning, it is the faculty's issue." Mark agreed. "Successful teaching with these kids is that they understood the material, not that we completed the lesson plan."

The whole school theme this year was Quakerism. Each class studied a different aspect of Quakerism and presented it to the rest of the school. "Quaker values help to make this a safe place for our students, a community where we talk about how we can do things in a kind way," remarked Debbie.

Katie Hoffman, a ten-year-old student, seemed to sum up the feeling at Mary McDowell. "This community is special to me," Katie replied "because at my old school I was teased a lot. Here everyone is nice to me."

Friends School Quiz: Who is Mary McDowell? See last page for answer!

For more information on students with learning differences and resources available, contact Roxanne Hewitt at Delaware Valley Friends School, 610-640-4150, ext. 2610, or e-mail: hewittr@dvfs.org or Debbie Zlotowitz at the Mary McDowell Center for Learning, 718-625-3939, or e-mail: MMCL@juno.com

Pioneer in Friends Education An Interview with Dorothy Flanagan

How did you get involved in working with students with learning differences?

I taught for nine years in Friends education. There were often students with learning differences and, as a teacher, you were always trying to figure out what to do with students who were not functioning up to their potential. That is what made me begin thinking, "What do these children need that I am not providing?" This was in 1976. There was a real need for a school for children who learned differently and did not fit into the regular classroom. These were children who were not severely emotionally distressed and who were not retarded. If these children were taught differently, they could learn and learn well. However, they needed a totally different setting and a different kind of educational plan.

What was the field of learning differences like then?

Many people said, "This child is just lazy, stupid, or goofing off." Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) was not being diagnosed. There used to be all sorts of names for learning differences, for example, "minimal brain dysfunction." Eventually, the name became learning disabilities. We felt that in many ways a learning difference could lead to a disability if the child did not get the right kind of care. It really is not a disability if the student has access to the right kind of teaching and the right kind of school environment. It was very important that the school be a Friends school as well. Stratford Friends was the first Friends school for children with learning differences.

Why did you feel it was important that it was a Friends school?

I am a Quaker and it was very important to me that my working life and my religious life be integrated. Friends schools believe that the child's spiritual growth is fundamental. They are not just about the academics or what school your child gets into next. Friends education is about what kind of a person are you helping to develop and those of us in Friends education have the opportunity to help our students become people of moral character and integrity. Many children with learning disabilities who don't get the help they need may get into drugs or the wrong kind of life. They can find it a great struggle to live up to their potential. To help them understand that they are good people is really

important. There are Friends who would like to see Friends vocational schools and Friends schools for children who are retarded. Someone needs to start them. There is room for lots of schools to meet many different needs.

Did you feel like a pioneer in terms of the work you were doing?

We certainly felt like pioneers. Parents were the people that had the most faith, particularly when we started. We were interviewing parents and children and we had nothing to show them. All they could do was talk to two teachers. The parents had a great deal of faith and hope in their child, knowing that their child had something that was not being seen or addressed in conventional schools. We believed that if these students were in a smaller class, with a different kind of attention from the teacher and really different kinds of teaching, they could learn. But we didn't know. We were pioneers in the sense that pioneers leave familiar terrain not quite knowing where they are going and how they are going to get there. When I look back, there were a lot of things we did not know, but we learned really fast. We learned what worked with the children. Now everyone knows that multi-sensory teaching is what is most helpful to these children. We just knew it worked. We would look at each child and figure out what kind of teaching would best help that child learn.

I understand you were involved in starting a couple of other schools.

About five years after we started, George Rowe and Beverly Morgan contacted Sandy Howze and me to help them start a school like Stratford Friends on the other side of the river. We used to meet once a month to consult as they were planning the Quaker School at Horsham. After that, the members of the Board who wanted to start the Mary McDowell School in Brooklyn heard of us. They visited the school and we spent time talking with them about everything from curriculum to budgets to boards.

The goal for our students is to get them back into a conventional classroom as soon as they are ready. However, for some of the students this is how they learn and they are not able to return to a regular school. After the students left the sixth grade, parents were really at a loss as to where to send their kids. A small group of educators got together to look at what it would take to start a college preparatory middle and high school for children with learning differences. Just like when we started Stratford Friends, we needed to find a location and a head of school. We worked out a mission statement and talked about budgets and curriculum and what kinds of children the school would serve. We looked at lofts, warehouses, and churches everywhere in and around the Philadelphia area.

Holly Locke, who was the Executive Secretary of the Committee on Education, was talking to the Committee about this new idea. Irene McHenry, who was on the Committee, said, "This is why I came to Philadelphia. I knew there was a reason." We were wondering if we were ever going to find someone who had an understanding of special needs and Quaker schools. Irene was a Quaker, a school psychologist, and she had worked with elementary and high school students. She became the head of Delaware Valley Friends School. We found space at Harcum Junior College and that became the first location. Of course, the school grew by leaps and bounds. It was wonderful and exciting.

What advice would you give to teachers who find that they have kids in their schools with learning differences?

There is a lot teachers can do in the regular classroom. It depends upon how severe those differences are and whether the teacher is willing to be flexible about the way she teaches. In fact, teaching for children with learning differences is good teaching. To learn by doing things is certainly something a lot of schools do and it is the way children learn best. Part of our mission has always been to be a resource to other schools and teachers. They can ask us for a consultation about how to help a particular child in their classroom or for a workshop for their faculty. We also have teacher training

classes at our school.

You are planning to retire at the end of the year. What does the future hold for you?

After 33 years in Friends education, it is time to have sabbatical! I look forward to life having a gentler pace and visiting family and friends. The unknown possibilities in my future are exciting. In retirement, you need to learn new things, and you need to harvest the past. My new learning will be to seriously study art. Harvesting what I have learned over the past thirty years, in a way that can I share with others, is less clear. It may mean consultations and workshops; I don't know. I am saying "No" for awhile to give myself space to see the larger picture. The unknown piece of retirement makes it very exciting and a little terrifying. I still love my work and this school. It has been a great journey. The sadness is leaving the people and the daily connections. The connections have been deep, but they will be different. I am looking forward to discovering the ways in which they will continue and my journey will unfold.

The Friends Council on Education, on behalf of the entire Quaker education community, wishes to thank Dorothy for all she has accomplished for children with learning differences and for Quaker education. We wish her health, happiness, and new discoveries as she enters her "retirement!"

The Spirit Document

Every year, at the beginning of the new school year, the students, teachers, and administrators at the Quaker School of Horsham gather in meeting for worship for business to begin work on a monumental task. They gather to create the Spirit Document that outlines the expectations for behavior for the entire community for the coming year.

The Quaker School of Horsham is a pre-1-8 school for children with learning differences, located in Horsham, Pennsylvania, about 15 miles north of Philadelphia. The Spirit Document was created by head of school Bill Hallowell, in order to unify the school community and give students the chance to practice articulating their thoughts about how they want to be treated in their school.

How can anyone manage to facilitate such a process and actually create a complete document each year? Bill laughed, "Over the last five or six years, I have learned some tricks for managing the process." The first step is for student representatives from each class to meet to discuss how they would like to be treated while at school. Bill writes down key words and presents a rough draft to the whole school community. Each class reviews and discusses the draft. Because many of the students have visual, auditory, and language problems, the small group work allows them to practice expressing their thoughts and feelings in a group in which they feel comfortable. When they go to the all-school meeting for worship for business, the students are more prepared to provide feedback on the document.

"The process usually takes about four 45-minute meetings for business," explained Bill. "The kids discuss how they want to be treated by each other, what is important, what is fair and what is not fair. Everyone participates. The Spirit Document is not complete until everyone agrees. The language in the document is theirs."

After the Spirit Document is agreed upon, it is written on a large poster and all members of the community sign it in much the same spirit as a Quaker wedding certificate. The document is then hung on the wall where students and teachers can refer to it during the course of the year. Bill remarked, "The Quaker School at Horsham is a Friends school first, and a school for children with learning differences second. The Spirit Document gives us a tangible way to express our Quaker beliefs and testimonies because it is the essence of how we treat each other in this community."

The Spirit Document

At a called Meeting for Business, held on the 21st day of the 9th month, 1998, we, the students and staff of the Quaker School at Horsham, located in Horsham, Pennsylvania, gathered and agreed, through a process of consensus, to the following expectations regarding the behavior and spirit of everyone in the community:

- We will respect others, their things, their space and their efforts.
- We don't like to be teased because put-downs don't feel good.
- We like to be treated with kindness.
- We will do our best not to copy, mimic or plagiarize the work of others.
- We will laugh with, not at, other people.
- If we get teased, we will react in an appropriate way.
- We will talk out our disagreements with others and we will not fight.
- We will not take our anger out on others.
- We will let others join in our activities.
- We will treat others the way we would want to be treated.
- We will not play rough with others, especially if they are smaller.
- We will not scare other people.

And having been present at that meeting, we set our hands below and agree to live in the spirit of this document.

"Why Can't We All Just Get Along?" Study Circles on Racism & Race Relations

Why can't we all just get along? Different races, different ethnicities, males and females, different religions, and gay and lesbians and straight people? Why can't we just embrace all the differences and become one big happy family?

Happy families do not just happen, even in our own nuclear family. Differences can create fear that can turn into anger. "Getting along" requires work, beginning with simply talking about it. As Erin Sio, clerk of the Diversity Steering Committee and coordinator of the Study Circles on Racism and Race Relations at George School explains, "Everyone is so worried about saying the wrong thing, they just say nothing. The main ingredient in accepting differences is creating an opportunity for dialogue, creating a safe environment where differences can be discussed."

George School, a Friends 9- 12 boarding and day school, located in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, has been working on that dialogue for five years. Using a manual for community-based discussions, the school began by running Study Circles on Racism and Race Relations, a five-week program, for teachers and administrators. However, the Diversity Steering Committee quickly realized that the whole school community needed to be included in the discussion -- parents, students, and even residents of Pennswood, a neighboring Friends retirement community.

The study circles include sessions on personal beliefs and experiences with racism, racism in our communities, changing racist attitudes, public policies for ending race-based inequality, and moving from words to actions. Erin remarked, "In the last session, I always ask, 'In the ideal world, what would

George School look like in regard to race? How would it be different? What can we change now?"

The program is offered three times during the school year with the second session reserved exclusively for students. Erin recalled, "We had one group where a white student shared an exchange he had had with his African American roommate. The white student was a Civil War buff with a special interest in Confederate war strategies. He had once gone to a baseball game wearing a Confederate T-shirt. The black roommate was offended and outraged. In telling the story to the group, the white student was not afraid to look as if he had made a mistake or appear vulnerable. The whole group discussed the story at length and benefited from his openness."

What are the problems in running the program? "The biggest problem," said Erin, "is reaching the silent white majority because they feel blamed and guilty. We have to talk about white privilege and the difference between personal guilt and collective guilt. You need a skilled facilitator to help the group separate the two. You cannot move forward unless the white participants can understand that white privilege does not make them bad people. Everyone in the group has to feel safe to express their feelings honestly."

In addition to running diversity programs on campus, the Diversity Steering Committee looks at the curriculum and ensures that it includes a multi-cultural point of view. Does the curriculum send the right message about diversity to the students and parents? The Committee also looks at opportunities for students and teachers to increase their knowledge of diversity off-campus. Eight students and four adults attended the People of Color Conference, sponsored by the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

"In order to promote change and acceptance of differences, a school community has to be proactive," asserted Erin. "We don't do this because of political correctness; we do this because it is the right thing to do. This is the Quaker vision. The study circles as well as all the other efforts around diversity at George School are incorporating the Quaker testimonies of equality, acceptance of differences, respect for all, honesty, and integrity into the very fabric of our school. We have a long way to go, but at least we have begun the journey."

If you would like more information on the Study Circles on Racism and Race Relations, contact Erin Sio at George School, 215- 579-6500, X4620 or e-mail: Erin_Sio@georgeschool.org

"Can't we all just get along?" - A Manual for Discussion Programs on Racism and Race Relations (1994) or Toward a More Perfect Union In an Age of Diversity: A Guide for Building Stronger Communities through Public Dialogue (1997) can be ordered by contacting the Study Circles Resource Center, P. O. Box 203, Comfret, CT 06258, Phone: 203-928-2616. Cost for the manual is \$5.00 with discounts for large orders. These publications can be photocopied. Companion videos can also be ordered.

Reflections

Letter from the Executive Director

"As I turned to walk toward Founders Hall, I could hear a din pouring out over the Haverford campus from all the Friends school people greeting each other. It was a joyous sound!"

The first National Gathering of the Friends Council on Education was a roaring success from beginning to end. "Speakers, pushing horizons, clarifying issues, being in the company of friends." This comment from a participant sums up the general feeling of the 350 people who attended the event.

Keynote speaker, Juan Williams, spoke from the perspective of an author, a journalist, a father, a

person of color, and a graduate of Oakwood Friends School and Haverford College. Juan described his personal journey at Oakwood where he felt "embraced and supported." The experience "lit in my heart a spirit of caring." Juan explained that he was in the generation in which he was one of only a few black students at Oakwood and Haverford. While feeling like an outsider, he welcomed the opportunities that integration into the white culture offered. "Today," he says, "there is a critical mass of minority students on campuses mounting a challenge to Quaker orthodoxy under the rubric of diversity." The new generation of students of color are asking that the institution, not just let them in, but change to reflect their difference.

Juan urged the schools to maintain a strong Quaker presence to preserve their meaning and purpose. He also exhorted them to stay the course with these students who are in rebellion. To stay with them and their families and to face the difficult conflicts and tensions this may bring.

Juan sees those in Friends schools as not just educators, but as "history makers" who can be an example of what "a diverse educational institution can be and can mean for American society." He believes Friends schools are on the frontline of education and race relations in America, and that Friends educators have no idea of the impact they could have if their schools were truly willing to face the tension and embrace diversity. The "prize" for implementing this truly revolutionary and challenging concept, "is nothing less than the heart and soul and the educated mind of future Americans."

Peggy McIntosh and Aurora Camacho de Schmidt responded to Juan Williams by pushing the horizon's even further. Peggy McIntosh, Associate Director of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, and graduate of George School, maintained that no Friends schools, or any school, can boast of providing a first class education when the "imbedded assumption" is that "knowing has been done by white people." Peggy challenged schools to work to build a curriculum "which puts a floor under all students and says they belong equally... and says they all count."

Peggy believes "there is great promise for inclusivity in Quaker educational theory," but in Quaker practice she worries that "the white European roots of Quakerism keep showing." There is a danger that for Quakers, "silence protects us from knowing our differences." Peggy, like Juan urged the schools to recognize the importance of conflict and find new ways to use diversity to build true communities.

Aurora Camacho de Schmidt, Professor of Latin American Literature and Spanish at Swarthmore College, viewed Juan Williams talk from the perspective of what she called an "enormous crisis" in education. Pointing to the changes since the landmark Brown vs. The Board of Education decision of 1954, she reminded listeners that the net effect is that today, "63% of all white students go to schools that are 90% to 100% white.... We are in a system of separate, but unequal schooling."

In this context, Friends schools have a job to do to go beyond mere integration. "Students need to be embraced, but they also need to be embracers." She asked, "How do people of color do that?" For Aurora, it is when their culture is seen as "not just an absence of the dominate culture. Rather, their culture is a plus because it has its own dynamics, its own offerings, and its own gifts." Friends educators must learn to listen deeply to the messages of rebellious young people. Aurora believes it is "a message which says we are not the edge.... We want to be in the center. We are entitled." She pointed out that the people of color are not only the receivers of education, but they are the givers of education as well.

Friends schools were presented with a major challenge from each of the speakers. Each speaker believes that Quaker schools can and must make a difference. Each, however, pointing to the work, discomfort, tension which will need to be faced if we are to fulfill the promise of Friends education.

I look forward to furthering the discussion which took place at the National Gathering. This may be the most important work Quaker educators need to do in the coming decade.

Kay Edstene, Executive Director

Transcripts and audio tapes of the speeches referred to in this article can be obtained by contacting the Friends Council on Education at 215-241-7245 or e-mail: quakered@aol.com.