

Quakers in Yorkshire 16 October 2021
The Mount School York Principal's Address
(Incorporating a report from the Head of the Junior School)

To say that it has been a very difficult and challenging year since we last reported into QiY is an understatement. However, as everyone across the world continued to feel the often devastating effects of the global pandemic, pupils and staff at The Mount have continued to rise to the challenges it has presented to us.

Throughout it all, the teaching and learning and pastoral care of pupils has remained at the highest level, thanks to the innovative teaching and hard work of staff across the School. The support of our parents has been unstinting and in true Mountie style, our girls have embraced the challenges, turning them into opportunities for growth and development, as you heard earlier from our College Leadership Team.

Throughout the pandemic, we have drawn great strength from our community and our Quaker ethos is at the core of that. Morning Meetings continued in year group bubbles, and these proved to be hugely stimulating and thought provoking during what was, a time of crisis for the world. Our focused silences and reflections on our daily texts brought a sense of calm and belonging and my weekly messages to the whole community, including parents, were always themed to enable reflection upon and action across the week, many playing on the need for giving hope and resilience to a world that was suffering more than any of us could ever have imagined.

Senior School girls used Quaker Week in October 2020, to have in depth discussions about Living as a Quaker. Presentations were created by Senior School girls that were shared with Junior School pupils, so that the younger girls could think about the Quaker Testimonies and how to embed them in their daily lives. Junior School girls produced their own films explaining what it means to them to be in a Quaker school, and these were shared with the wider world through Twitter. This helped girls to really understand our core values of simplicity, truth, equality, peace, social justice and sustainability, and how these are evidenced in everyday life at The Mount.

For this year's Quaker week where the theme was Resilience and Hope, I drew on the ideas from the Quaker.org website and posed the girls and staff the same three questions that Quakers had been asked to reflect upon nationally. The theme has been picked up in Key Stage 3 Religious Studies lessons and this coming week we will have girls reporting back to us in Morning Meeting, on what their reflections on those questions are, and how being in a Quaker School community gives them Resilience and Hope.

As we review at our strategic aims and create our development plans each academic year, we keep always keep our Quaker Foundation at the heart of everything we do. Quaker planning is now not just a once a year tagged-on activity, but has very much become an integral part of Leadership Team meetings at every level, and is feeding at regular intervals into our strategic priorities for both the pupils' academic achievement and pupils' personal development. In the Autumn Term of 2020, we carried out a survey of pupils and staff to ask what the Quaker ethos meant to them, and the replies helped us to focus our thoughts on

other things we could do to further evolve our Quaker identity. As lockdown eased in the Spring Term, we looked forward once more to being able to continue our journey of having Friends from the local Quaker Community in school, talking to girls and staff, and sharing their Quaker experiences and the Quaker journey they were on. This was hugely empowering, and uplifting.

As government guidelines changed in June 2021, we were once again able to sit in silent worship as a whole Senior School collective group, and the first time we did that, it was quite a moving experience, I must admit. It made us realise just how important that collective coming together through our meetings for worship are and how immensely powerful the experience is.

Two weeks ago, during Quaker Week this year, the whole school, from Reception through to College, took part in our charity fundraising Quaker Walk where we followed the 5 mile route of the Rowntree Walk, encompassing York, during which girls learnt so many new facts about the history and heritage of Quakers in York. Part way through the walk, girls called into Friargate for refreshments and Junior School girls attended an excellent talk from Barbara Windle, learning more about the history of Quaker worship and of The Mount School. The girls were full of buzz and excitement when they returned from the walk which was lovely to see, and hear.

As pupils returned to the classroom after the second period of school closures in the Spring Term of 2021, we were extremely aware of the impact lockdown was having on both pupil and staff mental wellbeing. We have done much over the past year to address this, encouraging both pupils and staff to speak out about how they are feeling, and the whole community has responded to make the supporting of one another with regards to mental health, a huge focus for all.

In February, we took part in *Children's Mental Health Week* with the theme '*Express Yourself*'. In Junior School the girls discussed mental health in their Global Thinking lessons and then were set a series of challenges to complete during the week. These included activities such as meditation, making a happy box, having a conversation about mental health with a parent, and creating a playlist. During the week, we also took part in *Inside Out Day*, where girls wore clothes inside out to show that you don't always know how people are feeling on the inside so you must be kind at all times to the outside. We also participated in *Dress to Express Day*, which allowed the girls to be creative with their outfits and to understand how diverse as individuals we all are, and how we express that through our dress.

We took the decision last academic year to adopt the *Girls on Board* approach to friendship difficulties in anticipation of the increased difficulties in re-establishing friendships that we knew would emerge after such an extensive period of being away from other pupils. Using the *Girls on Board* framework pupils are encouraged to sort out low level friendship issues themselves, having gained an insight as to why these issues arise. We have seen an immediate impact with parents now saying that they too have a greater understanding of why it is so important as parents to take a step back and to allow their daughter to have more space and time to sort out friendship issues themselves.

Safeguarding at all levels remains a high priority and the School responded to the *Everyone's Invited* awareness of abuse by providing opportunities for discussion surrounding the issues that this has brought to the fore, at an appropriate level, and to ensure all girls were reminded that they should report any such behaviour. Over the past two years we have been focussing on developing our Relationships and Sex Education and Health Education curriculum in accordance with recent changes to the statutory guidance which make the teaching of RSE a much higher priority in all schools. It has been an interesting journey we have been on and it has made us reflect as a community in so many ways about how we view young people and in particular for us, support our girls through the ever tricky path of growing through adolescence and into adulthood.

Black Lives Matter was a national initiative that girls at The Mount also embraced and this month, we are doing much in School to celebrate *Black History Month*, as we once again have social justice at the core of what we do. We are constantly striving as teachers, to find new ways to keep such issues at the forefront of pupils' minds, as we live in an ever-increasing diverse society, and School community.

We continued over the past year to embrace the many positives that have come out of having to deliver on-line learning, and throughout the year we have witnessed exciting developments in our Junior School Explore, Discover and Create Curriculum. Within our creative curriculum there is an emphasis on girls embracing a more collaborative and creative approach, enabling more open-ended and blended learning tasks. We have strived to further embed a culture for independent learning amongst our youngest pupils. This way of working has increased the girls' level of independence, as was hugely evident and helpful in managing remote learning for our Junior School girls during the lockdown. The girls are set challenges and must analyse information, share ideas, problem solve and present work in innovative ways. The topics have sparked imagination and curiosity across all age groups.

As I said at the start, it has been a very challenging period over the past 18 months, and particularly for school leaders. The often, last-minute changes to the government guidelines has been a constant issue throughout, and it has been a strain at times working out how to address and balance the varying views within the community, especially those of parents and staff, when often extremes in opinion make doing the right thing by everyone very difficult to achieve. Following Covid risk assessments, the wearing of face coverings, having to walk round school following a one-way system, and having to stay 2m apart at all times were measures that put a big strain on what all pupils and staff could do when in school.

We were very fortunate, however, due to being a small school and with our excellent management of the ongoing risks from Covid-19 infection, to not have had to isolate any pupils or staff last academic year, until the very last week of the Summer Term when our Year 9 bubble needed to isolate. It was not the end of term that those girls had hoped for, but we had managed to get to that point without any mass disruption to school life. This term, so far, we have had an increase in pupils off at any one time due to Covid-19 but numbers remain small and we are managing the situation well once again.

One thing I personally found very helpful as a school leader during the pandemic is the support I could draw on from other Heads, both within the Girls' Schools Association and within the Quaker Heads' forum. There are nine Quaker Schools that sit within the Friends Schools Council (The Mount, Bootham, Ackworth, Breckenbrough, Leighton Park, Sibford, Sidcot, Friends' School, Lisburn in Northern Ireland and Newtown School, Waterford in Southern Ireland), and the Headteachers from those schools met via Zoom on several occasions during lockdown in order to share experiences, and to provide support for one another.

One of the biggest challenges teachers in the Senior School faced last academic year was the grading process for the GCSE and A Level Teacher Assessed Grades, as once again public examinations were cancelled. Thankfully, we navigated that road extremely well, with staff working phenomenally hard to get the evidence base right for the processes dictated to us by the examination boards. Our results for both GCSE and A Level this summer were excellent and whatever anyone might say about Teacher Assessed grades being inflated and not worth the same as grades achieved through sitting public examinations, our students worked extremely hard to get those grades and deserved everything they achieved.

It is true to say that the strength we have in our Quaker community and our Quaker values that bind us together as a school community, enabled us to dig in and fight the pandemic together, during what has often felt like a war on humanity. I have drawn on that strength as a leader on many occasions over the past 18 months and know I am so fortunate to be in a school where staff, pupils and parents do think of the wellbeing of the Head as much as they do everyone else in the community.

We could dwell on the negatives of the past year, however, there have been so many positives, especially since pupils came back into school after the second lockdown, ready to embrace face-to-face education once more. As activities opened up once again last Summer Term, it was wonderful to hear the laughter return in School, and to see the girls' faces light up when doing the simple things that coming to school brings.

This September, we have launched a partnership with Leeds Rhinos Foundation and we now have a Leeds Rhinos Netball hub running out of The Mount each week. Our girls, from Junior School upwards, are now coached by some of the country's top Netball coaches and sportswomen on England Netball pathways, who are providing inspiration to motivate and drive our girls to even bigger and better heights within the sport, and our girls are loving every second of it!

Watching life come back to normal in schools has been such a wonderful thing to see. Whilst some think that what we might be doing in school is a little reckless when society at large is still suffering from Covid-19, it has been vital for children's growth and development to watch them become children once again and to not be constrained in school by social distancing rules, mask wearing and other restrictive measures.

This December, I come to the end of my time at The Mount, having taken the decision last year that I want to leave the teaching profession and move on to new and different things. Retiring from teaching after 34 years in the profession, I will take many, many happy

memories with me. I have never regretted for one minute going into teaching and I would do the same again if I had my time over. Working with young people is the most rewarding thing one can do with one's life. I have taught hundreds of pupils across the years and as a senior leader for the past 22 years, I have had huge influence on educational policy and practice across four different schools.

The last six years of my career, working at The Mount, have been the most rewarding. Being a Head is the pinnacle of a teaching career. At times in my career, I was not sure if I wanted to be a Head given the huge responsibilities that fall upon the shoulders of the Head. However, I am so glad that I have been, and I will cherish the memories.

It is fair to say in my time as Principal at The Mount, I have had many challenges to contend with and some of you in this room know that more than others. Taking up post in January of 2016, after the School failed an ISI inspection in December of 2015, with no bursar, and with no Marketing lead, was not how I expected my first headship to start! However, I got through that, and more importantly The Mount School got through that, and I gained much as a leader as a consequence.

The fact is that Mount is a wonderful school, and despite the many challenges, I have loved my time as Principal of the School. I am not a Quaker, but it was the Quaker Foundation of the School that drew me towards the School and I have learnt much on a personal level by embracing the Quaker ethos on a daily basis over the past six years. In particular, I have loved working with the girls and getting to know each and every family well. But also, and probably more than anything else I will take away from the past six years, is the huge support that I have had from the staff in school as they have been behind me every inch of the way, and especially the support I have had from my Senior Leadership Team who are a very special group of people to work with.

I want to end by thanking Quakers in Yorkshire, for giving me the opportunity to lead The Mount School. It will always hold a special place in my heart, but as I move on in life, I know it is time to pass the reins on and to allow someone else to take the School forward into the next phase of its development. I wish David Griffiths, my successor, the Mount School Committee and Quakers in Yorkshire, the very best for the future.

Adrienne Richmond
Principal