



## **Report on Q Study: ‘The very best opportunities’**

Dr Anne Parfitt

a.parfitt@bathspa.ac.uk

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Young people in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly deserve the very best such that they flourish in the future. As we know effective teaching and learning by staff for all students is a reality across the Peninsular. The overarching question for this study was: ‘What is working in terms of delivering the very best opportunities and how is this delivered in Cornwall?’ To address this topic a Q method survey was conducted. Below I briefly describe the Q research process and then, report on the findings from the investigation. Four views are presented that arose from the analysis of the responses.

### **Introduction: why Q?**

There are many challenges in the development and evaluation of education strategies, including providing opportunities to promote life chances and accelerate social mobility. One challenge is understanding how different stakeholders view a particular policy and the impacts that this might have on its roll out. Q methodology is an ideal approach for determining the range of viewpoints on a contested topic, such as social mobility, where there are a whole host of perspectives regarding what this means in young people’s lives.

### **How does Q methodology work?**

Q methodology uses refined research techniques to probe a topic by uncovering the range of viewpoints held about it. Participants complete the Q survey by ranking a set of statements about the topic of interest according to their own outlook. Subsequently, specific techniques are used to group people who hold similar views on the topic in question. We use it to describe the viewpoints rather than quantifying their statistical prevalence. By pinpointing these viewpoints, this research technique can empower those implementing strategies by identifying potential barriers and prospective affordances.

### **Investigating ‘The very best opportunities’**

Pre-service teachers, established teachers, school leaders and educators working across the Peninsular were approached to collect their viewpoints. The Q sort was conducted online and the platform was kept open for four weeks (March-April) for participants to make their entries. In total, there were 23 participants. In addition to collecting their responses regarding 30 statements, brief anonymous information about their role (e.g. pre-service teacher) and place of work was requested. This number of participants could be regarded as small, given the substantial number of teachers in the area. However, according to the advocates of this approach, this is sufficient for a Q study, as the aim is to infer key perspectives by targeting a relatively small sample of the whole population, rather than collecting the views of everybody. The study received ethical approval from the School of Education, Bath Spa University.

## **Findings**

The following four viewpoints emerged from the study data about providing opportunities.

### *View 1: Working within economic constraints*

Whilst many teachers do make a difference to pupils' lives, the lack of post-school opportunities is the major challenge that hinders schools. The lack of employment opportunities for young people in the region can have an impact on their schooling and ambition. When young people have to move away to take advantage of opportunities, they constantly anticipate scary or uncertain transitions, which, as surveyed teachers reported, made teachers' jobs more onerous than for those teaching in wealthier communities.

### *View 2: Sparking a curiosity for life in learners*

While education might be focused on achieving qualifications, schools also have a duty towards young people in terms of showing them wide horizons. Teachers are aware that a young person's background might set a cap on their outlook on life. While this is not to be dismissed out of hand, there is an obligation on teachers to introduce novel ideas and show possibilities outside of the immediate community. It is acknowledged that this might be fraught with challenges for families and young people themselves.

### *View 3: Staying open minded and being responsive*

Teachers are open minded about the purpose of education. Many believe that young people do not just get qualifications for employment, for they are also educated in keeping with the realities of their social situation. Isolation in small communities can be restrictive, unlike in cities, which have more freedoms to offer young people. Teachers under these circumstances are truly embedded in their neighbourhoods and negotiate around how things are done 'locally' in order to get on with educating young people.

### *View 4: Building strong resourceful teachers*

Teachers and schools build futures for young people and they need teachers who can help them develop resilience to face whatever life brings. Teachers acknowledge it is beneficial that they can come through diverse routes into teaching careers. They also continue to enhance their own capacities through ongoing training. Similarly, young people will try out many experiences after leaving school: in Cornwall and elsewhere. The most positive input that the school can make to the pupils is by building the flexibility of the teaching staff so that they can deal effectively with all eventualities.

## **Summary: What is working in terms of providing the very best opportunities on the Peninsular?**

These four viewpoints shed light on how opportunities for young people are perceived. These findings may not be applicable to other groups or places. They do provide valuable insights from those working on the ground regarding how educators could best orient themselves when striving to deliver the best opportunities for the young people on the Peninsular.

I am very grateful for the great support given to me in distributing the survey and for the participants' responses, without which the research would not have been possible. Thank you to all respondents from across Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly.