

The Hope Challenge (Re-imagining Ways of Working Together)

Dr Jane Moore, Head of School of Teacher Education and Michelle Pearson, Head of Primary, Initial Teacher Education (ITE).

INTRODUCTION

Context Setting

The task of preparing the next generation of teachers is one that is undertaken in the UK, and specifically England, in a complex and rapidly changing professional and policy environment. Newly qualified teachers have to be ready for the specific requirements of the schools in which they find their first posts, but perhaps more significantly, equipped to adapt to different schools, future policy changes, and always the diversity of needs presented by their pupils. We see this resilience and optimism as a key part of being a full professional and a “good teacher” (Arthur et al, 2015), committed to playing a full role in a specific school context, but more broadly outward looking in terms of refreshing and renewing practice, learning from others and being part of a wider educational community.

As part of our response to the political scrutiny of ITT, we in the School of Teacher Education at Liverpool Hope University have been engaged in an active and ongoing process of examining our core values and defining practices as a teacher education provider and as part of this, reimagining the ways in which we work in partnership with colleagues from schools and other organisations. The political rhetoric since the White Paper of 2010 (Department for Education) has exploited tensions between the work of universities and schools in this regard, characterising university training as abstract and ideologically driven and a poor preparation for the rigours of the classroom. Liverpool Hope University colleagues and our partners have robustly challenged this representation in an ongoing review of programme content, delivery, systems and management processes that have involved university and school partners at all levels. Significantly, it is in mutually engaging with the complexity of the task as equal partners, rejecting the stark divisions and traditional power imbalance between “HEI” and “school”, that the genuine affordances of such a collaborative approach becomes apparent. Ellis (2015) makes the case for this in his discussion of new kinds of partnerships between universities and the profession. Relating this to the concept of “co-configuration” (Engestrom, 2007), Ellis (2015) writes that there can be imagined a “form of collaborative working [that] requires partners to come together and trust each other and the shared commitment to do things differently, to produce some new ways of working that will lead to the creation of new knowledge that can be capitalised for the public good” (p. 135).

Working for “the public good” is another essential strand in the project of reimagining partnership, with a view to interests beyond the localised and contractual; indeed, beyond the specific partner organisations at any given time. Our richer understanding of teachers as professionals who actively draw on both theoretical and practical expertise is underpinned by the belief that they do so out of an awareness of and commitment to social justice agendas; they are actively motivated by a desire to improve the educational and life chances of all pupils in all schools. Critically, being an effective, knowledgeable and skilful teacher is not understood as being distinct in some way from being caring and socially responsible; the two elements are part of a whole, in which securing the academic achievement of pupils is viewed as only one aspect of a relationship with them, together with respecting and caring for them as human beings with unique stories and needs (Gholami, 2011). This has become a significant feature of Liverpool Hope’s provision, realised in the developing concept of “the Hope Teacher” (LHU Partnership Ofsted Reports, 2012, 2014), as one who teaches “with moral purpose ... the whole child”. There is no attempt to deny the complexity and weight of such a claim, and in fact, colleagues in the School of Teacher Education and across the Partnership continue to explore the range of meanings such a statement carries. In general terms, however, there is an overt recognition that teaching is essentially *relational*, enacted through and embodied in the many forms of relationships teachers have with their pupils, day by day and over time.

The Hope Challenge: Working Together for School Improvement

The Hope Challenge raft of projects arose from a shared desire to find innovative and genuinely effective ways to engage with defined issues faced by a number of schools in the North West Region. These projects, more explicitly entitled “Working Together for School Improvement Projects”, were designed to enable Liverpool Hope University to support the work of Local Authorities and HMs in working with schools in socioeconomically challenging circumstances and those judged as “requiring improvement”, whether secondary, primary and special.

Whilst teacher education providers have traditionally been required to work with schools judged “good” or “better”, the new ITE Ofsted inspection framework includes a requirement to work with schools in “challenging socioeconomic circumstances” (Pupil Premium at least 25%) and those judged as “requiring improvement”. This development reflected the perception that thorough preparation for the teacher profession must include experience of a variety of school contexts and the opportunity to develop knowledge, skills and resilience relevant to as diverse a range as possible. Even prior to this, however, colleagues at Liverpool Hope had maintained collaborative relationships with a number of schools in challenging circumstances, viewing this as being part of meaningful membership of the wider educational community and indeed central to the idea of “partnership” itself.

The collaborative work across the whole project was based on a number of key principles that are outlined in the Project Aims below:

- To promote a vibrant collaborative and coordinated way of working for key partners in school improvement across the North West Region.
- To improve outcomes for pupils, particularly in terms of progress.
- To increase capacity for schools and LAs (Local Authorities).
- To develop a coordinated approach to CPD (Continuing Professional Development).
- To lead to sustainable outcomes for schools.
- To build resilience in newly qualified and recently qualified teachers so that they are able to be successful in a range of schools.
- To increase the number of talented graduates working in schools in socioeconomic challenging circumstances and those requiring improvement.
- To publish research findings to inform future provision.
- To develop a coordinated approach to research evidenced best practice.

One of the most innovative features of the Hope Challenge project is the involvement of trainee teachers in defined school improvement interventions that provides them with an enhanced experience, whilst benefiting the schools and pupils in a managed and sustainable way. For many schools in challenging circumstances, the task of supporting trainee teachers may be seen as an additional burden that they are reluctant to take on. However, the enthusiasm of trainees, and their growing knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning is often a very powerful and positive asset, with the potential for a significant impact on pupils, colleagues, and on the ethos of the school. Part of the Hope Challenge is ensuring we facilitate this view and enable schools to access this potentially rich resource. In these interventions, the trainee teachers have the opportunity to work with school colleagues but are supported and monitored by university tutors, so no administrative burden falls on the teachers involved. Crucially also for the trainees, the teaching and associated work undertaken as part of the interventions is not part of the formally assessed placements; we would argue that this allows them to make the most of the experience as an enhancement and without risk.

The case study that follows is based on one of several projects that have taken place in the last academic year.

REFERENCES

Arthur, J. Kristjánsson, K. Cooke, S. Brown, E. and Carr, D. (2015). *The Good Teacher: Understanding Virtues in Practice*. Research Report. University of Birmingham.

Ellis, V. and McNicholl, J. (2015). *Transforming Teacher Education: Reconfiguring the Academic Work*. London: Bloomsbury.

Engeström, Y. (2007). From stabilization knowledge to possibility knowledge in organisational learning. *Management Learning*, 38, 271-275.

Gholami, K. (2011). Moral care and caring pedagogy: two dimensions of teachers' praxis. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 19(1), 133-151.