

# Conference on new core content for Initial Teacher Education

2 March 2017 - central London

The DFE asked a group of professionals, led by Stephen Munday, to look at developing a framework of core content for initial teacher education (ITE) courses. The perception was that there is wide variation in the approaches being taken by ITE providers and that they needed guidance so that trainee teachers would have at least something of a common experience. We felt strongly that that ought to include the evolving science of learning and therefore our Director, Derek Bell, wrote a paper for them to consider.

I went along to the conference on behalf of Learnus to find out what happened to the submission Derek made to the group. The conference was extremely well attended, with well over a hundred representatives from schools, universities, local authorities, unions and the DFE.

At the moment, there is a confusing number of ways of becoming a qualified teacher, all involving a degree level qualification to start with, but then having a dedicated course to prepare people for actually teaching children in a classroom. This is the initial teacher education bit. One primary headteacher who spoke runs a school based programme that covered nine different routes into teaching.

The government had been encouraging more and more of this to be done in schools and less in higher education institutes (HEIs), but Justine Greening appears to have recognised the value of having HEIs heavily involved, if not actually delivering. There has also been a move towards an apprenticeship route, although, as Alison Ryan from ATL pointed out, this puts us at odds with the best practice in other international jurisdictions, where HEI courses dominate. The commission's remit was content, not structure, so no judgement was being made by them about the effectiveness of the different routes, or how many there should be.

They were determined to make the recommendations as simple and short as possible, to give a guide, but not to dictate a standard curriculum. The idea being to allow the freedom for providers to cover the bases, but to creatively deliver an experience in their own way.

The resulting guidance basically interprets the Teachers' Standards<sup>1</sup>: "The fundamental aim of the framework of core content is to ensure that ITT programmes enable trainees to meet the Teachers' Standards in full at the level appropriate to the end of a period of initial teacher training."<sup>2</sup>

They are therefore focused on what is actually mentioned in the standards, which is limited to pedagogical practice and general responsibilities. There is not much about theories of knowledge or learning, save a reference in section 2 of the standards to: "demonstrate knowledge and understanding of how pupils learn and how this impacts on teaching"

As a consequence the framework says:

"Providers should ensure that trainees are familiar with a range of techniques, including modelling work for pupils and scaffolding tasks with guidance that can be gradually removed as pupils become more competent. Trainees should be conversant with effective approaches for strengthening pupil memory, such as repeated practice spaced over a period of time, short tests, and making effective use of questioning."

---

<sup>1</sup> Introduced in 2012 and available from the DFE website

<sup>2</sup> A framework of core content for initial teacher training report para 1.3

and

“Trainees should be introduced to important factors affecting pupils’ education such as cognitive load, motivation, understanding and focus.”

There is no mention of developing a thorough understanding of what the evolving science of the brain is telling us about learning, which Learnus feels there perhaps ought to be, as this would seem to be pretty fundamental to the art and science of teaching.

I asked Stephen Munday about the submission that we had made and he admitted that there was a lot of scepticism in the group about educational neuroscience and that they couldn’t agree as to what might or could or should be included. I got the distinct impression there was hostility to the idea of including something they had come to regard as controversial because of the prevalence of ‘neuro-myths’. They had therefore left it up to providers to decide what was included in their courses. He did say, however, that providers ‘should’ include it and that all teachers ‘should be researchers who consider all the evidence’ in a culture of ‘research informed teacher development’.

This obviously gives bodies like Learnus a potential role, particularly if providers are looking for specialist inputs or remote learning units to include in their ITE programmes.

In the discussions was mention of an attitude amongst students and tutors that regards engaging with theory as unimportant in comparison with classroom practice - particularly in school led providers, where there was also a tendency to train students just to work in their particular school, or group of schools.

So there are large potential gaps in the core content, not just in terms of learning theory and knowledge about the brain, but the effects of social and economic status on development and the ‘why?’ in children and young peoples’ behaviour. as one contributor said “I suspect it is all in there in most, but there is a problem over who considers what to be essential.”

The group were “hoping and expecting that the framework would provide room for providers to include what they consider to be important” but that there was a danger that trainees might still have very different experiences. Providers could choose to specialise in different areas.

At this point I was wondering whether there was a possibility of having providers choose a specialism with an emphasis on educational neuroscience and cognition. This has the potential of creating a cadre of teachers with an interest in and high level of understanding of cognitive science which they could take into school organisations.

Other places where cognitive science might reasonably have an input would be in understanding and managing behaviour, SEND and emotional well being and mental health, all of which were the subject of inputs to the conference. In all of these areas student teachers are in danger of being taught techniques for managing a situation without developing the understanding necessary to have an insight into why the situation has arisen in the first place.

Justine Greening has laid heavy emphasis on continuing professional development, particularly through the early years of a teacher’s career. However, the majority of CPD is happening through Multi Academy Trusts and (often related) Teaching School Alliances. These tend to be heavily focused on performance and accountability, which makes the theoretical underpinning an even harder sell than it is to ITE providers. There is a demand for the kind of inputs that Learnus has been making, as we have shown, but follow up is difficult. The development of some sort of unit about the science of learning that could be remotely accessed would greatly help with supporting both ITE courses and CPD in schools thereafter.

There is, however, a real crisis in teacher retention, with more and more younger teachers leaving the profession early. This is a lot to do with workload, but also with student behaviour and the difficulty of managing it. There is a great deal that cognitive science can do to help practicing teachers develop

their understanding of how to be more effective, but also to widen their understanding and enjoyment of their role more generally. Many young teachers go into the profession with high ideals, a moral purpose and the desire to make a difference. Too many have this crushed out of them by relentless accountability, crushing workloads and poor management and leadership.

We desperately need to develop a reflective, researching, creative body of educators who have a deep understanding of how children learn and who are self-actuating enough to attain the job satisfaction necessary to sustain them - who have professional expertise in learning. I venture to suggest a narrow training focused on the crushing mundanity of the Teachers' Standards is not going to get us there.

Richard Newton Chance  
30 March 2017