Using a witch's hat to avoid 'the approved pattern'

Finding hope in a pedagogical stance that fosters quiet resistance

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Abstract

In this article we share the work we have done as teacher educators in developing a third-year undergraduate module which nurtures our students to develop their own pedagogic vision and to consider themselves 'change agents' able to orient themselves within social and political structures rather than merely adapting to the status quo.[1] We locate our pedagogical approach within the current policy context where the core content framework (CCF) is required as the minimum entitlement for all teachers.[2] We conclude with the notion that the positioning of pupils, teachers and teacher educators as 'subjects' offers hope in collectively and quietly resisting a pedagogy and curriculum which appears to offer a limited way of being in the world.[3]

Keywords: initial teacher education; resistance; pedagogic vision; agency; teacher leadership; pedagogical tools; teacher values; collaboration

Nan Shepherd, teacher educator and nature writer, wrote nearly a century ago that as tutors we have 'the heaven-appointed task of trying to prevent a few of our students who pass through our institution from conforming altogether to the approved pattern'.[4]

Nan's insightful words are pasted on the back of our office door. In spite of, or perhaps because of, the absence of 21st century education-speak, we feel buoyed by their spirit. Nan's desire for her students to avoid 'the approved pattern' suggests to us the drive for integrity, for exploration and above all possibility. And so, as we head off through the pasted office door to lead education studies seminars with our third-year undergraduates, we are carried by the mood of Nan's words, reframed into notions such as 'change agent' and 'tempered radical' which are situated at the heart of our teaching.[5]

That said, we are not blind to the slow creep of prescriptive policy which is crystallised in the latest iteration of the ITE/T CCF described by Smith and Lander as an essentially 'state-mandated and enforced curriculum for ITE/T'.[6] According to the Ofsted ITE inspection framework, the requirement is for the framework to be incorporated as the minimum entitlement for all teachers within a wider curriculum in order for providers to achieve accreditation.[7] Although the Department for Education maintains that providers should also seek to integrate 'additional analysis and critique of theory,

research and expert practice as they deem appropriate', the connection of the CCF to the teachers standards and the requirement of the CCF as a minimum entitlement which is inspected by Ofsted suggest the likely default of the *whole* curriculum to the core content.[8] This is problematic in the sense that the CCF promotes research based on improvements embedded in productivity and comparison, and appears to take little account of the complexity of human beings operating within an intricate social world. This has historically been an important part of an educational research tradition which supports teachers in making sound pedagogic decisions which respond to the complex lives and profiles of their learners.[9]

Context

Our education studies module is situated in year three of the undergraduate course and is structured to 'wrap-around' students' final school-based training. Most of the module sessions take place before students start their placements and are focused on preparing them to develop a rationale for their stance as teachers. To support them in this endeavour, the module encourages students to become 'leaders of learning' and 'agents of change' through a critical examination of their own values as part of developing an educational philosophy informed by a scholarly approach to educational knowledge and research.[10] This standpoint reflects teachers' potential to develop their agency to engage in quiet resistance and to find ways to 'address inequalities and offer moments of hope to young people from marginalised groups'.[11] This is undertaken through questioning how and why knowledge gets constructed in the way it does in education, and how and why some constructions of reality are legitimated by the dominant culture and others are not. The critical pedagogy theorist McLaren identifies a distinction regarding three forms of knowledge, a notion posited by the German social theorist, Habermas.[12] In education this includes:

- *Technical knowledge* – emphasised by mainstream educators promoting liberal and conservative educational ideologies. These are linked to measurement and qualification based on natural sciences for sorting, regulating and controlling students, such as SATS results, reading scores.
- *Practical knowledge* – aims to enlighten people so they can shape their daily actions in the world through describing and analysing social situations historically and developmentally.
- *Emancipatory knowledge* – attempts to reconcile and transcend opposition between technical and practical knowledge. Helps us understand how social relations are manipulated by power and privilege, and how to overcome domination and oppression.

McLaren upholds the importance of understanding the relationship between power and knowledge, believing that the dominant curriculum separates knowledge from issues of power as it treats it in a technical manner and gives little consideration to knowledge as an ideological construction.[13] For example, the CCF upholds a technical image of teaching as a decontextualised series of interventions focused on narrow objectives, overlooking important nuances and interrelationships embedded in the purpose of education.[14] From this perspective, technical knowledge is favoured over emancipatory knowledge and hegemony is primarily maintained through consensual social cultural practices, forms and structures produced in specific sites of the school and the political system.

Thus, in order to foster emancipatory knowledge, we uphold how students need to develop awareness of such debates linked with the purpose of education to inform their own pedagogic vision and values within the context of social and political structures. For these reasons, the module programme includes the following foci: teacher identity; political perspectives; working with 'disadvantaged learners'; well-being and mental health; creative collaboration; exploring diversity; antiracism; refugee education; climate change; and teaching controversial issues.

Important to the programme is students' engagement with processes of reflexivity and self-examination of practice. As such, we draw on Hordern and Brooks who recognise how the human dimensions central to teacher education regarding 'decision-making, motivation and behaviour are profoundly influenced by our past histories and the practices we are embedded within' as opposed to the theories underpinning the CCF which suggest that insights into the human condition can be identified empirically.[15] The shortcomings of this position were also identified by a module tutor regarding issues of students' reflexivity: 'I think it's more about evaluation, what did other people think, not really awareness of who they are and reflexivity'.

Indeed, central to understanding the complexities in developing a reflexive and agentic stance to teaching, the module draws on Forde and McMahon's theoretical framework of leadership for learning.[16]

The leadership for learning framework

The leadership for learning model moves away from the traditional structure of leadership that places the headteacher as the sole leader to one in which class teachers are encouraged to be leaders, shifting towards a more democratic focus of leadership. Implicit in this is fostering teachers as agents of change where learning is directed at both teachers and pupils. For instance, by addressing the needs of diverse groups, teachers' own practice is enhanced. For example, student evaluations included how: 'The module has opened my eyes to different aspects that I wouldn't have considered

otherwise e.g. being an agent of change'*; and from another, the importance of *'teacher agency and how I can implement change and difference'*. From this perspective, Forde and McMahon argue how in current times there are expectations of teachers collaborating with colleagues for working towards a 'shared vision'.[17] One student evaluation recognised that the module: 'has impacted on what school I would like to work in and the importance of collaboration'. Biesta's notion of the learner as 'subject' is helpful here as our hope is that our students will think about how as teachers they will exist *in* and *with* the world, both natural and social, and how they might support their pupils to do the same.[18]

A range of sources informing pathways

While highly valuing the role of academic literature in our module, we argue that a multifarious approach, where students have a degree of choice about the sources they engage with in addition to their reading, supports them to remain curious and fully engaged in the debate. In this way, they are able to make critically informed and contextualised decisions about the direction of their practice which take them beyond a technical approach. We have therefore expanded our sources to include videos, webinars, podcasts and film. Students are required to engage in at least one academic reading each week and then select from a choice of two further sources. Not only do these alternative media capture students who have a tendency to direct their critical attention to only one reading, they are an opportunity to foreground the voices of marginalised groups otherwise missing from the conversation. In addition, they expand the range of professionals, academics and researchers that our students engage with.

For example, a recent webinar on antiracism provided a forum for a local rap artist (studying for her PhD), teachers, researchers and local authority professionals to share ideas and thinking which our students could explore and then further interrogate in seminar discussions. Students were also particularly inspired by a video recorded by a recent graduate of colour from their course. This early career teacher (ECT) filmed herself in her own classroom, discussing the opportunities she had taken to be an agent of change and leader of learning in relation to antiracist practices in her school. The video charted her intellectual and emotional journey through the challenges and opportunities she had been faced with during her first year of teaching and how her university experiences had informed the position she had taken. Here students saw first-hand an example of a teacher 'like them' taking an agentive stance in response to a particular social context. Student evaluations comment on how some of these alternative media allow an opportunity for them to consider educational theory 'whilst on the move and in a free and casual style'.

Two key pedagogical tools and a witch's hat

To illustrate our approach, we present here two pedagogical approaches we use on the module; metaphor and independent thinking projects alongside our newly developed overarching theoretical framework which we call 'the witch's hat'. While each approach begins with a discrete session, they are woven across the module through structured activities and in the way that discussions are channelled in seminar sessions. These pedagogical tools are not especially novel in teacher education, but we make a justification for holding fast to a pedagogy which unearths and enlightens and which values emancipatory knowledge. Our reflections on these are informed by a planned conversation between three of the module tutors and by written student evaluations. Our tutor conversation reached from the challenges of operating within a particular political context to broader existential questions about uncertainty and fear. Our student evaluations were garnered at the end of our final session, as students were about to embark on writing essays focused on their educational philosophy. The questions ensured that feedback was authentic and would inform module development. We asked about the usefulness of our own pedagogical tools but also how students felt their learning might inform their pathway towards being an ECT.

Constructing metaphors (pedagogical tool 1)

After they have returned from placement, students are encouraged to explore their teacher identity in greater depth to enable them to articulate their educational philosophy in their upcoming written assignment. In their first post-placement seminar session we ask them:

> to develop a metaphor that reflects the kind of teacher they believe themself to be
>
> to choose from Pollard's examples of architect, conductor, gardener, engineer or director or develop their own (The metaphors are supported with visual images)[19]
>
> to work in small groups to produce one metaphor per group
>
> to produce a poster to share with the larger seminar group explaining their rationale.

The activity encourages creative and abstract thinking about their identity, making more explicit their intuitive knowledge about themselves, their practice and their assumptions.[20] The collective nature of the activity can be challenging as it involves negotiation and compromise, yet it also works as a pedagogical device, reflective tool and instrument of discovery.[21]

As examples, the authors developed metaphors which reflected their own practice.

Rosie, the hiker

Rosie sees herself as a hiker, moving through an ecologically diverse but finely tuned landscape where everything is co-dependent. Although she has a planned destination, she knows that she may take an alternative route if the weather changes and she takes time to connect with all that is growing in the environment. This reflects her commitment to collaboration with colleagues and students, the importance of understanding and responding to the context (personal, political, social, cultural) she is operating within and recognising that she is just passing through the lives of her students, planting seeds as she hikes.

Alison and her class – Acrobats

Illustrations by Alison Hermon

Alison selected a metaphor for herself and her class as aspiring to a dynamic interdependent acrobatic performance, reflecting the importance of a teacher's role as co-creator to 'balance' the agency and contribution of all. By adopting a collaborative, curious and democratic approach, all members of the performance are encouraged to work together, develop ideas and take responsibility for initiating and managing worthwhile creative risks in various collaborative formations, supported by the 'safety net' of mutual, trusting relations.
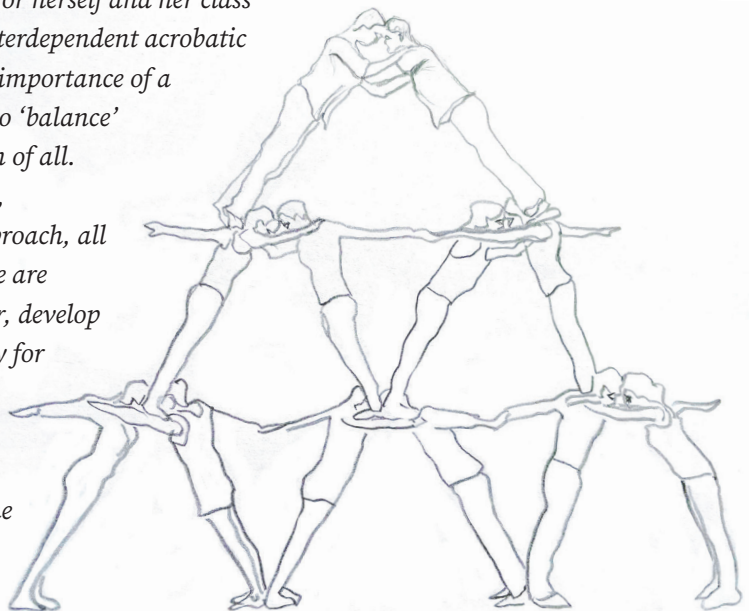
We hope that our work with metaphor might act as a tool for teachers to nurture and grow the seeds that we plant in the seminar room, reflecting Thomas and Beauchamp's findings that teachers' metaphors change over time, aligning with changes in their professional identity.[22] Reflecting this, our tutor conversation began with Biesta's notion of *becoming*.[23] We considered the lengthy journey to understanding what it means to be a teacher and at what moment teachers might really understand this. In light of this, one tutor commented that our role is to 'seed an opportunity for students to think in a particular way further down the line' commenting that if teaching remains a technical activity, it poses challenges in working with children to 'express opinions, think critically and understand what chimes with them in the world'. One student recently commented how she anticipated that parts of the module would influence her practice further down the line. This highlights moreover an opportunity for us to further embed metaphor activity across the course, allowing scope to develop more conceptually complex metaphors which Bullough identifies as resulting in stronger teaching practices.[24] We consider our metaphor activity as one pedagogical tool which has the potential to move the students beyond 'the approved pattern' identified by Nan Shepherd to be independent thinkers who remain curious about their practice.

Independent thinking projects (ITP) (pedagogical tool 2)

Using a medium of their choice (e.g. a short narrated PowerPoint/video/audio), and working in groups, students explain and reflect on the key principles and ideas of the key thinkers explored. They explain how these ideas inform their values, pedagogy and educational philosophy, and why.

Each group selects one of the thinkers from the list to explore the educational ideas/ethos advocated.

They critically investigate the ideas and perspectives being advocated by their allocated thinker.

They consider how the ideas might align (or not) with their own values and how they might inform your own pedagogy and philosophy of education.

They consider how they relate to the leadership for learning framework.

Choices offered to students include: global social theory (including critical race theory); Rebecca Webb and Perpetua Kirby; A.S. Neill; John Hattie; critical pedagogy theory (including Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Maxine Greene); Daisy Christodoulou; Katherine Birbalsingh; Reggio Emilia approach; Pasi Sahlberg.

The projects are intended to support students in building their philosophy of education, allow an opportunity to research key thinkers, encourage students to explore possibilities for thinking differently within the school context and to understand how values, policy and practice converge. It was noted that through this scholarly activity students were successful in interrogating perspectives and theories from different angles and weighing up how these might align or not with their own pedagogic vision as a leader of learning. Students went on to share their ideas with the wider group.

Our metaphor and independent thinking activities are intended to engage students in being deliberative about their role as educators, embedding the notion of themselves as agents of change. Although these activities do address parts of the CCF (in particular sections 1 and 8), they reach much further in furnishing opportunities for our students to consider the nuances of their roles, their assumptions about the purpose of education, their pedagogical choices and how they engage others in their teaching endeavours. In short, the activities contribute to the 'emancipatory knowledge' valued by McClaren as the students consider how they enact and enable social relations in the classroom.[25] While this contributes towards ensuring the inclusive classrooms which policy demands, we would argue that this new knowledge about the roles they play, developed through the metaphor and independent thinking activities, empowers our students to take an agentive stance, sometimes unearthing a disparity between the roles they have taken as students and those they wish to take as new teachers. When the students were asked to comment on how they believe the module will impact on their work as a teacher, typical responses were:

> As a white woman, I am very privileged throughout my educational experience and always felt reflected in content exposed to me. This course has opened my eyes that not all people are. This is something I will take into my teaching and I will make sure that the community is connected in my practice.

> It developed my knowledge on teacher agency and making changes based on my teaching philosophy.

However, despite these positive student evaluations, one tutor reported how students 'struggle with the idea of leadership being other than what we usually think of as leadership'. The following section explains how we developed a new model to support student understanding.

The witch's hat

Although we have worked with the leadership framework for a number of years, more recently we developed it further by harnessing 'the witch's hat', a hexagonal model from Alison's doctoral research into the leadership framework (see Figure 1). Alison developed

her model by seeing its resemblance to a 'witch's hat' playground ride – a conical swing balanced on a central pole which oscillates unpredictably – to show the dynamic and reciprocal interaction between teacher and learner for balancing agency. Alison also chose the model because of its metaphorical connotations. The original witch's hat ride was phased out in the mid-1980s owing to its dangerous mechanism, to be reinvented more recently with a safer design. Alison saw how this could represent her theory for balancing agency via promoting creative risk-taking supported by a safer structure.

Figure 1: The witch's hat diagram

Educational philosophy of children's learning
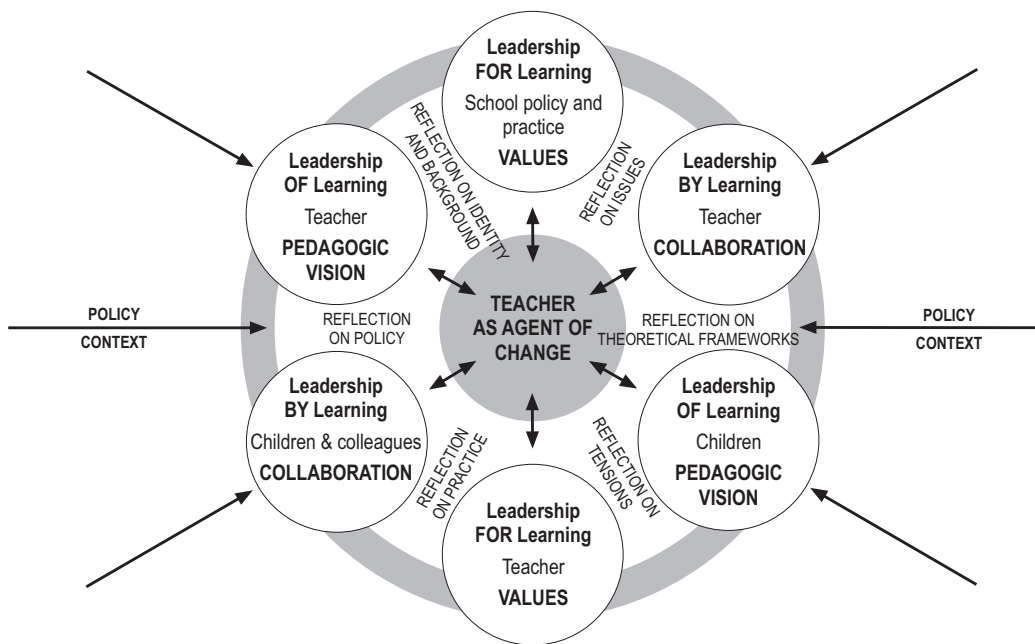
As such, there appeared to be strong parallels between Alison's model and the leadership framework in terms of the democratic approach to this view of leadership and the way in which it could support students as agents of change. These were arranged to show the dynamic interrelationship and tensions between two poles for each part of the framework. From this perspective: leadership *for* learning works towards establishing a set of shared *values* between teachers and the context of the school, as well as a means of engendering a common set of values across wider society for achieving social change in relation to promoting social justice and equality; leadership *of* learning focuses on the importance of the teacher's *pedagogic vision* in determining strategies for successful

learning made visible through children's learning outcomes and leadership *by* learning encourages *collaboration* between teachers working and learning together with colleagues and children, and the impact of this for leading learning for whole school practice.[26]

Nevertheless, we also recognise the significant tensions and issues arising from increasing political direction around the purposes of education and how values in education can be deeply contested impacting on all three parts of the framework. Indeed, as part of the process of mapping the leadership framework on to the model, we identified how the module endeavoured to explicitly address these through students' critical reflection on policy, theory and practice. In this way, the circular diagram identifies six areas of focus for this critical reflection – 'identity and background', 'issues', 'theoretical frameworks', 'tensions', 'practice' and 'policy'. Also, we recognised how the model related to our perspectives as tutors, reflected in the way in which the policy context is directed externally.

Conclusion

In considering the ways in which we seek to hold fast to the spirit of teacher education as an open-minded and intellectually curious endeavour, we have become increasingly aware of the role of pupil, teacher and teacher educator, all as 'subjects' who can harness agency in their lives.[27] Our tutor conversation about the module highlighted our intention to support teachers in leading their pupils to operate as 'subjects' in the social world, to foster their curiosity, support them in managing uncertainty and engage with bigger questions about the world. In addition, our pedagogical approach exemplified in the independent thinking projects, metaphor activity and witch's hat model is designed to enable and trust new teachers to operate as 'subjects', able to make sound pedagogic decisions which respond to the complexity of the social and cognitive worlds of their pupils. Crucially, as teacher educators, creating this space to reflect left us feeling confident to continue to root out 'pockets of possibility' in the module while feeling assured that we were also delivering the 'minimum entitlement'.[28] In short, we are all (pupil, teacher and teacher educator) 'subjects' who may collectively and quietly resist a curriculum and pedagogy which seeks to promote a particular kind of knowledge and, to our mind, a limited way of being in the world. In our drive within the module for integrity, for exploration and above all for possibility, we may yet still 'prevent a few of our students who pass through our institution from conforming altogether to the approved pattern.'

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Notes

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