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Rowe, J and McLain, MN

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# The challenges of curriculum design in Initial Teacher Education (ITE): A Perspective from Liverpool John Moores University

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CURRICULUM DESIGN IN CONTEXT 0 COMMENTS 13 MIN READ



It is little surprise that, with so much riding on the recruitment and quality of new teachers, the nature and content of Postgraduate Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes continues to be the source of significant debate and often polarised opinion within the education community. ITE in England has experienced significant change over the last decade, including the move towards a ‘School-led’ policy for

ITE (DfE, 2011) (DfE, 2015). In spite of these significant structural changes, ITE often continues to be perceived in the press and the ‘edu-twitter sphere’ as ‘out of touch’. Although OFSTED data recognises the high quality of existing ITE provision, assertions continue to be made in some quarters ‘that many teachers entering the profession are ill-prepared’ (MacBlain and Purdy, 2011) and suffer from both ‘a reality shock (..) but also a “washing out” effect of insights gained during teacher preparation’ (Korthagen et al., 2006).

As part of the regular cycle of programme review at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU), ITE staff within the School of Education and our Partnership have undertaken a comprehensive redesign of our postgraduate Primary and Secondary ITE programmes with a view to implementing a revised curriculum from September 2018. This has provided an invaluable opportunity for our Partnership to reconsider the goals and purposes of our teacher education programmes.

There is limited prescription of ITE content and course structure: there is no ITE syllabus which providers must follow. Providers will refer to recommendations (DfE, 2016) and must comply with regulatory requirements (DfE, 2018) (Ofsted, 2018). Consideration also needs to be given to the content of school curricula and of examination specifications and their implications for student teachers’ subject knowledge. Outside of these requirements, there is a substantial degree of autonomy. Alongside this apparent freedom, however, providers have to wrestle with (sometimes conflicting) expectations and competing demands, including the need for student teachers to achieve both Qualified Teacher Status and a postgraduate Academic Award.

## Developing a sustainable ITE curriculum

On ITE programmes, students spend roughly two thirds of their time learning in schools. It is vital therefore that an ITE curriculum is framed and designed as a partnership curriculum, with structured learning taking place in a range of contexts. In our experience, ITE partnerships know that ‘simply transmitting theoretical knowledge about teaching in the hope that student teachers will apply this in the classroom is not effective’ (Chapman et al., 2014). ITE partnerships recognise that successful ITE curricula are co-designed and co-taught; that they must be rooted in a partnership’s shared pedagogy of teacher education and draw on the strengths of all those involved in new teachers’ development; that the designations ‘school-led’ and ‘university-led’ are disingenuous. Most importantly, that in order to be successful, ITE programmes must be underpinned by trusting and respectful relationships which recognise that professional learning takes varied forms. Perhaps then, the most important consideration in curriculum design in ITE is that learning be planned holistically, and that no single site of ‘delivery’ be perceived as ‘better’?

Our curriculum re-design process at LJMU has involved extensive consultation with University and school-based staff as well as current student teachers on our programmes and external advisers. We have been informed by a growing body of research in Teacher Education and have drawn on the shared principles which underpin our partnership vision. As a provider with a substantial track record in working harmoniously and constructively with school partners, with roughly half of our provision designated as ‘school-led’, we have confidence in the benefits of a curriculum delivered in partnership, which values equally the importance of reflective, evidence- and research-informed content, and professional, practice-based knowledge.

In redesigning our programmes our partnership’s shared aim was to establish a suite of programmes with a particular emphasis on content which aims to develop new teachers who are committed to issues of social justice and inclusivity, and who are equipped with some of the tools to ‘work out what works’ in *their* classrooms and for *their* learners, in an informed, scientific, open-minded way. Whilst systematically integrating critical evaluation of research evidence within our programme content, we have resisted pushing any particular approach or suggesting that there are educational ‘silver bullets’ or ‘recipes’ for how to teach, which make it appear as though teaching is simple and unproblematic. During our partnership discussions cooking metaphors have emerged organically as regular features of our discourse and have helped us to ground our approach. Some are also included in recruitment presentations, where we make it clear that our partnership does not believe in ‘ready-

meal' approaches, but focuses instead on understanding *ingredients* (including subject matter, pupils, pedagogies etc.).

So, what will our new curriculum look like? From a school perspective we have maintained our commitment to a 'home school' model; a strength which we learnt from our School Direct provision and for which we have increasing evidence from our data, improves relationships, builds student confidence and mentor quality, and, most importantly, enables deeper engagement with and focus on learners and learning. We have also maintained a curriculum structure which means that student teachers are normally at university one day a week in the first half of the year; our partnership has found this to be the most effective model to ensure an integrated curriculum. We believe that such fundamental, structural decisions are important if students are to learn through experience in meaningful ways and to make the important links which grow their professional understanding.

Our revised programme content will be bespoke to the needs of our student teachers, given that we offer programmes which cover the 3-19 age range. Early stages for all student teachers will focus (both at university and in school placements) on deliberate, confidence-building practice in key areas such as classroom management, modelling and explaining, questioning and dialogic teaching, with a commitment to the importance of developing each student's subject knowledge for teaching. Underpinning all teaching across our partnership will be a commitment to the importance of inclusive practice and issues of social justice in education. The latest research into cognition and psychology will feature strongly, but so will an exploration of the role of creativity and collaborative learning. On Primary programmes the value of learning through play and of philosophy for children approaches will be integral, and we will take full advantage of our on-site forest school to develop outdoor learning practice. We have worked hard to decide what we should prioritise, what best fits when and where, and who has the most relevant expertise within our partnership to develop our student teachers' understanding. This has demanded engagement, honesty and humility from all parties.

The academic assessment of ITE student teachers can be a knotty problem for providers and re-evaluating our approach has also been a subject of considerable discussion. At LJMU, most ITE programmes offer a Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) of 120 masters level credits (two thirds of a masters – double that of a PGCE). This reflects our commitment to promoting the importance, right from the outset of a career in teaching, of research-informed and research-engaged practitioner inquiry alongside sustained reflection on learner impact. This philosophy also underpins our school-based coaching approach and our academic assignments. It is linked to a strong emphasis on the importance of subject specific knowledge and domain specific pedagogical understanding.

Although the PGDE has been very successful, with significant numbers of trainees going on to complete a master's in the early years of their teaching careers, previous iterations of the programmes had led to overly burdensome and sometimes dislocated assignments, which we saw the potential to address. In our revised curriculum planning, student teachers' professional knowledge will be appropriately valued through the introduction of a professional viva, jointly conducted by school-based mentors and academic staff, drawing on our well-established rigorous end of programme triangulation process. We believe that these highly reflective research and practice informed conversations, combined with a reflective analysis of each trainee's impact on learning and discussion of their professional development goals ( framed within their Career Entry and Development Profile), merit academic credit, as well as securing the recommendation for Qualified Teacher Status.

Other master's degree level work will also be firmly grounded in research-informed practice, with an academic submission focusing on Critical Incident Analysis (Tripp, 1994) in specific thematic areas such as behaviour for learning, subject knowledge and assessment. Segall (Segall, 2002) identified that Critical Incident Analysis helps students to examine and illuminate the dynamics of a teaching situation, and their individual role within it, and we have found that this approach ensures that each student's learning about teaching is more powerfully embedded in their personal experiences. A further assignment submission will be a critical reflection on inclusive curriculum design, with the final assignment taking the form of an assessed presentation, drawing together the students' emerging skills in practitioner enquiry and intended to support our beginning teachers in identifying the impact on learning of self-selected, evidence-informed classroom strategies.

In redesigning our curriculum, we have benefited significantly from the input of our partnership schools, who will be fully involved in the evaluation of its success. We have not pretended that we can include everything nor have we been driven by accountability measures and the demands of creating evidence of meeting the Teachers' Standards. Instead we have sought to represent, through our curriculum, our partnership's core principles; combining a confidence-building focus on core professional knowledge and skills, alongside engendering and sustaining a fascination about the complexities of learners and learning. We hope in so doing that the curriculum we have designed will contribute towards teacher retention and teachers' professional growth and enable LJMU beginning teachers to 'keep climbing their learning curves long into their careers' (Allen and Sims, 2018).

We are sure that other providers will recognise many elements of our programmes in their own curricula. We are not pretending to be ground-breaking. What we have realised is that the most valuable aspect in the development of new programmes, has been the conversations which have taken place across our partnership; in deciding what to include and where, and who is best placed to take the lead. We hope that our approach will succeed in providing our student teachers with an understanding of the *ingredients* they need to consider, both in planning their own teaching and in evaluating its success. We believe that it is this *understanding and curiosity* which will sustain our beginning teachers; which will provide a positive experience for them and for their learners and which will ensure that they continue to enrich the educational diet offered in their employing schools.

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