

Hope for Education:

But what does that look like? What is the anatomy of hope? How does it transform a school community? And how do we educate for hope?

The aim of this lecture is to consider

at least five more schools in the north-east, he simply said: “OK let’s work out how to go for it.”

And so, at that moment, the legislation for city academies broadened out from the business sector to include the involvement of more faith based organisations, especially those who were Christian.

By 2003, this vision had become a reality and Emmanuel College had opened its first sister school, an 11-18 Christian ethos school called The King’s Academy in Middlesbrough. They also had agreement in principle to establish Trinity Academy in South Yorkshire. The proposal was to open this second school in September, 2005.

Trinity Academy was due to replace, Thorne Grammar School, an 11-18 comprehensive school with thirteen hundred students and a hundred and fifty staff members. Thorne was one of the highest areas of social and economic deprivation in the United Kingdom. It was an ex-mining community where the closure of the mines by Margaret Thatcher had led to extremely high rates of multi-generational unemployment. Aspirations were fatally low and the only school in the town typically sent around six students to university, which was approximately 5% as compared to a national average of 45%. Common issues within the school were teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, bullying, truancy, smoking and high rates of underperformance.

However, a couple who attended a church in Doncaster had a growing burden and vision for transformative Christian education in the town. They had no idea how this would transpire but they faithfully prayed. After years of prayer, Sir Peter Vardy and the Emmanuel Schools Foundation agreed to take over the school and to create Trinity Academy in its place. What they needed now were Christian school leaders.

The teacher trainer thought chocolate was the key, the Prime Minister believed it to be school structures and a faith based ethos.

The story of how I came to be one of those Christian school leaders began in my early teens. One day, the mother of a friend of mine looked at me and said, ‘*you’re better than you think you are.*’

I thought it was an odd thing to say, but she intermittently said it to me over the next period of time and it constantly repeated itself in my mind. Not only did I remember it, but it put me

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revelation of my sin, and repentance led me to receive Christ, the hope of glory. I couldn't fulfil the expectation, but with Christ in me, '*all things are possible.*' Matthew 19:26

This indwelling of Christian hope began to transform my mind and to give me a passionate vision for God's kingdom to come. What then took shape was a desire to set up Christian schools that would reflect this kingdom and transform the students and their community. My vision was for these schools:

1. To be part of the national system, not independent from it - thereby impacting local communities for Christ;
2. To be in areas/countries of disadvantage, thereby having the dual effect of, community development and the dissemination of Christian hope;
3. To challenge students with the '*Big Questions*' in life, enabling them to debate what they thought about these questions against a clear Christian view;
4. To enable students to achieve their personal best and to become transformational leaders.

I didn't know how I would do this. I didn't even have any teaching experience, but my vision was set.

After completing my doctorate, I set about getting some teaching experience which led me from Oxford to Cambridge where I worked in an international community school. During that time, I read and prayed into this vision, still not entirely sure how it would be realised. One significant experience I also had was when I won a global teacher award. This award placed me in a rural school

It was at that moment that Trinity Academy was born, with the key driver being: to have the character of Christ, bringing the message of Christ.

The Director of Schools went to discuss this with the Board of Governors and eventually what came back were seven core values that formed the backbone of everything that came next:

Honourable purpose, Humility, Compassion, Accountability, Courage, Integrity and Determination.

The building works, the leadership training, the discipline policies, the programmes of study, the focus on charity work, the teaching and learning philosophy, the class structures, the timetable, the hiring of staff, the engagement with the community, the engagement with the former school, all moved forward on the basis of the seven core values and how this school could reflect the character of Christ so that we could, with integrity, speak the message of Christ.

They said, “*you’ll never do it.*” And yet, here it was. A new school.

So, what did this new school look like?

were lacking in their previous school. When we asked students, what is the difference between this school and your last school, their initial response was – “*you do what you say you will do.*”

Fourthly, *teaching and learning.*

ambassadors for a new way to live. The local community commented on the improvement of their behaviour around the town and everywhere we took them people passed comment on their manners, appearance (uniform) and attitudes.

After two years of opening, the Office for Standards in Education (the British inspection body) declared that the school was '*outstandingly*' well led, heavily over-subscribed and driving transformation throughout the community. At the same time, the specialist schools and academies trust named the school as the most improved school in Yorkshire and the following year it was awarded the accolade of most improved academy in Britain. Within five years, the Office for Standards in Education judged the school to be outstanding overall.

So, what can we learn from that story about educational hope?

Firstly, let us consider the anatomy of hope.

In classical Greek mythology, Prometheus was punished for stealing fire from the gods and giving it to humanity. He was chained to a rock and an eagle would attack his liver every day. He was eventually freed by Hermes and Athena, who helped him to escape. Prometheus is often seen as a symbol of hope and the power of the human spirit.

hope. No matter how things are going today, that virtue raises our heads and enables us to believe, as Peguy writes, *'that tomorrow things will go better.'*

However, hope does not end with a raised expectation for the future, rather, when we see this virtue it inspires us to model the same virtue. Hope leads to action, it is not static, it is not merely wishful thinking. As Paul writes in Colossians (1:5) *'the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you.'*

didn't leave it there but rather went on to share the message of who could help them to meet those expectations.

This vision of a better future was further exemplified through high and yet personalized academic targets. The emphasis was firmly on personal best and yet set that personal best at a level higher than they believed was possible. It then gave students the agency to meet those targets through the set system i.e. they could move up or down sets depending upon their effort and achievement. This enabled them to have short term goals within the longer term targets, all the while engendering hope.

The pathway to that better future was provided through the discipline system and the classroom activities. The discipline system used the character of Christ to raise their expectations of who they are. It then held them strongly to account if they veered away from the right path. In the classroom, the emphasis was also on starting with a vision of what was possible i.e. the exemplar and then providing high support (instruction) towards meeting that goal.

Both systems were characterized by extremely high demand and extremely high support. Both systems gave them a clear vision of excellence and helped them to meet that aim.

All the while, assemblies, special lectures and the PTE programme would explain this model in terms of Christian hope: there is a better future and Christ is the way to that future.

Sounds easy!

As all of you know – it isn't and it certainly wasn't.

David Halpin, as previously mentioned, so rightly identified the four enemies of hope in an educational setting: cynicism, fatalism, relativism and fundamentalism and all of these were knocking at our door all of the time.

Cynicism (as opposed to scepticism) he defines as '*being cryptically critical of most things*' (p.18). Taking on the staff of the old school also meant taking on a culture of cynicism. In the early days, everything we did was criticized internally. Not only that but staff criticized us in front of students, loudly in the staffroom and on the corridors. How does hope deal with that?

Exactly the same way as hope was brought to students it was brought to staff. Again, it started with: '*you matter*'. This started a conversation with them about the role of the teacher, their ability to affect the entire culture of the school and the life chances of young people. However, this needed to be backed up with support. Hope has high expectations – a vision of a better future, but also trust in the help by which one expects to attain it. Classrooms, teaching resources, timetables, teaching loads, assistance with discipline and so the list goes on. Unless leadership is prepared to support the teacher they cannot demand from them and expect no cynicism.

Fatalism is the enemy of hope as it is based on determinism and therefore a paralysis of the will to change conditions. It cripples the vivifying nature of hope and in an educational setting allows both teachers and students to be cynical in a way that avoids responsibility: '*We can't change things*'.

Duckworth in her summary of hope presented the famous psychology experiment by Seligman and Maier where two dogs were placed in separate cages and shocked repeatedly. The first dog was able to stop the shock by pushing their nose against the panel at the front of a cage. Whereas, the second dog did not have this available to them. The next day the dogs were placed in a different cage with a low wall in it. A high pitched tone heralded that a shock was on its way. However, both dogs could have escaped the shock by jumping over the wall. The one who had had some control the day before learned to jump the wall, the other one didn't. Based on repeated experiments the conclusion of this work was that, suffering that you have no control over diminishes your resilience, whereas, suffering that you have control or perceived control over, develops perseverance and ultimately hope.

In the case of Trinity, fatalism was one of our biggest enemies. Both staff and students were fatalistic. They felt '*out of control*' of their own destiny which was cemented by high social deprivation and therefore learned helplessness. For students, the academic system went a long way to overcoming this. The idea that they could determine what set they were in i.e. class grouping and that they could move each term enabled this sense of control over their own destiny. The results of this were students who arrived in set seven out of nine and who ended up in set one across all of their subjects and who eventually went on to study for degrees in Cambridge. One young man came in in set nine of nine and ended up in set one, being Head boy and going on to study medicine.

For staff, this learned helplessness was partly overcome through the new model of schooling. The finances the

Hope energized the leadership, the academic strategy, the discipline system, the quality of teaching and fought against the virulent enemies of hope: cynicism, fatalism, relativism and fundamentalism and the outcomes spoke for themselves.

However, again that was not the end of the story.

In 2011, Trinity was graded outstanding by Ofsted. Nine months after that I left to have a child. By the time I came back I was presented with the following challenges:

1. A key Christian member of the leadership team had been asked to leave due to a relationship he had conducted, and repeatedly denied, with his PA;
2. Another key Christian member of the leadership team was significantly suffering with burn out;
3. The sponsorship of the organization had been transferred to another organization, one whose schools didn't prioritise a Christian ethos;
4. The government had changed from Labour to Conservative and was in the process of changing accountability measures, Ofsted criteria, funding arrangements, assessment protocols and curriculum standards.

When we speak of hope – it is not wishful thinking. It is not weak or flimsy language. It is not a virtue to be passed over or ignored or forgotten. It is, in fact, all there is.

I looked at the school and its context at that time and I was like the dog in the cage who couldn't escape the shocks. I had no control over sponsorship, indiscretion or burn out. I had no control over government decision making or funding formulas. So, how was I to hope now?

Naturally, like the dog in the cage the shocks kept coming. The undermining of the Christian ethos through leadership indiscretion and lack of integrity. The breeding of cynicism through leadership burn out and the inevitable lack of support for teachers. The fatalism and learned helplessness that returned from lack of funding, the culture of excuses and constant cry of, *'it's not what it used to be.'*

Where does hope lie in this lethal cocktail?

Rudyard Kipling in his poem 'If' wrote, *'If you can.... watch the things you gave your life to, broken. And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools.'*

These words went over and over and over in my head. Could I? Could I start again only arguably from a worse position than at the start? Could I once again bring Christian hope to this situation? Did I have enough hope?

In Romans chapter 5 Paul writes, *'we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.'*

I knew I had to keep going.

It was hard. In the beginning it was eighty hour weeks but every day you saw the impact of what you were doing. This time it was hard to see any impact and the wind of change was

blowing in the opposite direction. Paul says to rejoice when it is hard. That is how we are counter cultural. Rejoicing when it is hard *is* hard.

As Yeats says in 'The Lake Isle of Innis Free' '*for peace comes dropping slow,*' and, in this case, change was slow and that was a deep challenge to my hope.

However, change did come. One day I had an email from a staff member that used to work for us. She said that she believed she was called to return to Trinity. Then a very experienced Executive Principal

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