## Hope as an Educational Right: Expanding Dr Sarah Trotter's Framework to Educational Access in the North East

By Grace Wilson

As someone navigating both legal education and the practical realities of educational inequality in the North East, reading my professor Dr Sarah Trotter's work, offered a unique and clarifying perspective. The concept of a "right to hope", due to its articulation in the rarefied area of European Human Rights Law, could be seen as an abstract philosophical notion that is remote from the practical challenges that educational inequality raises. However, in her essay, "*Living with a Sense of a Right to Hope*", Trotter performs a critical excavation of this legal principle, revealing in my opinion, profound implications for social justice far beyond a prison cell. By meticulously distinguishing between the formal, institutional 'idea' of a right and the internalised 'sense' of that right, she not only provides a helpful theoretical lens for understanding educational disparities in regions like North East England, but fundamentally reorients how we approach the work of overcoming them.

### Two types of Hope:

The edifice of Trotter's argument rests on a dichotomy between two fundamentally different forms of hope. The first is an **"idea" of hope**, one that can be characterised as transactional and formal, ratified by institutions. This hope is a procedural guarantee controlled by an external authority, such as government policy. Therefore, it pivots upon a transactional logic: if the mechanism is present (e.g a university access scheme), hope is assumed to exist. This causes individualised failure, placing the burden of engagement with the person.

Contrastingly, there is the **"sense" of hope**, characterised as relational and foundational. This internal orientation is felt through conviction cultivated by recognition. Being seen by others is what helps it flourish, for example communities and teachers, as capable of growth and deserving of a successful future. However, it cannot be granted, it pivots upon the individual seeing themselves as capable of hope.

Trotter's framework reveals the insufficiency of responses centered on the transactional "idea" of hope. In the context of StateElevate, it reorients our pursuit of educational justice towards the relational conditions necessary for young people to develop an authentic and embodied *sense* of a viable successful future. We are not just in the business of opening doors, or saying that the door has been opened; we are in the work of helping students believe they have every right to walk through them.

### The structural sentence

Trotter's analysis originates in the *Matiokaitis and Others v Lithuania (2017)* case in the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). Within this, the Court asserted that a life sentence that has no prospect of release or possibility of review violates human dignity, specifically because it strips the individual of the "right to hope". Here we can see the tangible use of the formal "idea" of hope - a procedural sentence review there to symbolise

the presence of hope. Yet, as Trotter discerns, this artefact is very different from the prisoner's internal phenomenological "sense" of having a right to hope. The former is an act of that state, the latter is an experience of the self.

When relating this to the North East, the region can be deemed to have a structural sentence. This is due to a set of persistent, data-driven outcomes consistently communicating limits to students' futures. This can be seen as institutional non-recognition: whilst national policy guarantees a formal right to education (the "idea") the relational "sense" of a right to an ambition of high status academic future is systematically withheld.

Consider the paradox of proximity and exclusion. The North East hosts world class universities, yet is a cold spot for progression to high-calibre universities. The University of Durham, an elite Russell Group institution within the region, admits only 10% of its UK undergraduate students are from the North East. This is the lowest of all UK universities. When this statistic is seen as an active signal, it transmits a clear message to a generation of local students: this prestigious academic community, physically nearby, is symbolically and substantively not for you. This mirrors the ECtHR's concern with degradation. Drawing on scholar Elaine Webster, Trotter defines degradation as a "symbolic exclusion from the human community". Admittedly not as severe, but the systemic underrepresentation of North East students at their own top universities can be likened to such an exclusion, as the denial of relational recognition attacks a young person's sense of belonging in a community of high academic achievers.

The pathology of 'grit'

Within the gap created by this structural sentence, a cultural narrative occurs: one of 'grit' and 'hard work'. The North East has a proud history of industrial labour and community solidarity that runs deep. It posits that triumph over circumstance is a test of individual character, which on the surface seems empowering, but if viewed through Trotter's theoretical lens can reveal itself as reinforcing this transactional "idea" of hope and its dangerous individualistic logic.

Trotter explains how authorities can engage in a rhetoric of "granting" hope. She cites an example of the UK Chancellor promising during the pandemic that "no one will be left without hope". Such statements, she argues, turn hope into a transactional commodity. The "grit" narrative performs a similar operation within education. It almost tells a story: the system has provided you with a formal opportunity (school, exams), the onus is now on you, the individual, to create the internal resource of hope and grit. This framework individualises both the capacity for hope and the blame for its absence, pathologising structural problems, placing the source of inequality within the character of the disadvantaged student rather than the design of the system that fails to provide relational recognition.

The consequences of this individualisation align with the failure of the transactional "idea" of hope. When a bright, hardworking student from a North East comprehensive school cannot envision a path to Cambridge, or

secures top grades but falters in the unfamiliar setting of an Oxbridge interview, the logic of grit induces a sense of shame and failure. As Trotter notes by drawing on Jean Knox, constructions that frame hopelessness as an individual deficit make people "responsible for their hopelessness and helplessness". The student internalises the outcome and interprets it as evidence of their own insufficient character, when really it is often an environment that has provided the "idea" (opportunity) but failed to provide the cultural capital or credible pathway necessary to generate an authentic sense of hope. The region's celebrated 'get on with it' attitude can compound harm, leaving systemic inequalities untouched by focusing on transactional provisions of opportunity.

Cultivating the "sense" of hope

Trotter's work points to nurturing the "sense" of hope. Central to her thesis is viewing hope as relational recognition. Hope is not a fuel tank to be filled with motivational speeches but rather a psychological state that flourishes when the individual is seen by others as being capable of change and a high achieving future. For education in the North East, this demands a systemic shift from opportunities to fostering a lived sense of possibility and confidence. It is only when this possibility is recognised by others that the individual is able to see themself as capable.

Fostering the relational sense of hope necessitates systemic mentorship and role modelling. Organisations like StateElevate are crucial in providing the tangible, relational proof that Trotter identifies as critical.  A mentorship scheme that pairs a Year 12 student from a Sunderland state school with an undergraduate from the same city now studying at King's College London does more than offer application tips (transactional support). It can perform a powerful act of recognition -  evidence that someone from an identical background can belong in elite academic spaces. This disrupts the statistical narrative of exclusion and provides a credible relational pathway where the formal, transactional pathway alone seemed insufficient or alienating.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Sarah Trotter's framework provides a profound vocabulary for understanding the work of social mobility in the North East. It clarifies that the challenge is not a deficit of "grit" in our young people, but a deficit of recognition in our systems. The "structural sentence" of data and the individualising narrative of "grit" conspire to deny the relational conditions for hope. Our task, therefore, is to build structures like purposeful mentorship that actively cultivate the lived sense of a right to hope. We must recognise that cultivating this "sense" of hope is, at its core, an act of building confidence as a concrete, warranted conviction in one's own place and potential within the academic world. This confidence emerges not from empty reassurance, but from the repeated, relational experience of being recognised as a legitimate participant in spaces of high aspiration.

Ultimately, expanding Trotter's framework teaches us that educational access is not merely about creating a map to elite institutions; it is about ensuring that every student can see their own reflection in the destination and that they can walk forward with the confidence that they truly belong there.