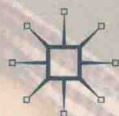# Student Teachers in School Practice

An Analysis of Learning Opportunities

ALASTER SCOTT DOUGLAS

Policy & Practice in the Classroom

Student Teachers in School Practice

An Analysis of Learning Opportunities

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In an educational era characterised by oversimplified solutions to complex problems, Alaster Scott Douglas provides in this study a deeper, richer look into how schools and departmental faculty work than is usually envisioned in the creation of educational policy. Using a cultural-historical activity theory framework and ethnographic methods, Douglas is able to investigate the social processes through which teachers think about how to teach their academic discipline in relation to the material conditions of their community. Within this setting, Douglas further studies how apprentice and novice teachers are socialised into the profession through their engagement in departmental discussions and student response to instruction.

Policymakers and teacher educators would be wise to read this research and learn that learning to teach is a multidimensional, difficult process whose effects cannot be easily reduced to student test scores or other superficial measures of how teaching affects learning.

Peter Smagorinsky,
Distinguished Research Professor of English Education,
The University of Georgia, USA

This book makes a significant contribution to the growing literature examining teacher education. In doing so, it asks new and important questions about the nature of the practicum in particular and the aims of initial teacher education in general. The clearly written account of 'Market Town High School' and 'Downtown University', and the work they engage in together to prepare new teachers, should be compulsory reading for everyone who cares about teacher education and the role of the teaching practicum.

The description of the culture of school departments is not only applicable to secondary schooling contexts but to primary and early years settings too. Indeed, any setting where novice teachers enter into groups of teachers organised around historically accumulated cultural norms and expectations. In adopting a cultural-historical approach to analysis of the work of preparing teachers, Douglas takes us beyond dominant assumptions about how individuals learn to teach – that learning to teach is something that primarily goes on inside individual minds – to an understanding of learning to teach as a collaborative form of workplace learning.

Joce Nuttall,
Associate Professor, Acting Associate Dean Research,
Faculty of Education,
Australian Catholic University

Policy and Practice in the Classroom

Series Editors: **Richard Race** School of Education, University of Roehampton, UK; **Barbara Read** School of Education, University of Glasgow, UK; **Alaster Scott Douglas** School of Education, University of Roehampton, UK

This series will publish monographs exploring issues to do with education policy and practice in relation to classroom settings, with each book examining the implications of its research findings for educational policy and practice. Themes explored include teaching and learning; youth identities; inclusive education; education policy-making; de-schooling; student teachers; the primary classroom; and science teachers.

Titles in the series include:

Alaster Scott Douglas
STUDENT TEACHERS IN SCHOOL PRACTICE
An Analysis of Learning Opportunities

Acknowledgements

Foreword

Learning to teach happens in schools, but what is learnt depends largely on the demands made on student teachers while they are there. This common-sense statement is underpinned by the account of learning offered by the late Vygotsky, which goes like this. People can be said to be learning when their existing relationships in and with the practices they inhabit change. That is, they reposition themselves within practices through their own attempts at making sense of the meanings and demands in the practices (Childs, Edwards and McNicholl 2014; Edwards 2014).

Much therefore depends on the meanings and expectations that are highlighted for student teachers in school discourses. Alaster Scott Douglas' book takes us inside the black box of the school practicum to reveal the knowledge in play and the associated demands while student teachers are supported as beginning practitioners. The primary focus is their interactions with their school-based teacher-mentors and their university curriculum specialist tutors, in four departments in the same secondary school in England.

It is a timely book; there is global recognition that initial teacher education needs to include a significant amount of time spent in schools. Yet we know all too little about the expectations placed on student teachers by their training programmes, the demands that shape them as beginning professionals while in school and the role that school department cultures can play. The book offers us a set of detailed case studies as a snapshot of one year in an initial teacher education programme which continues to evolve.

What can we take from the richly grained snapshots offered here? First, that initial teacher education partnerships, whether university or school-led, benefit from being built on relationships of trust which focus on developing the thinking practitioner. Second, initial teacher education programmes have much to gain from building strong research-based connections between school subject departments and curriculum teams in university departments of education. Finally, that we have been helped in coming to these important conclusions by the systemic analysis that has been employed in the study at the core of the book.

Let us therefore start with how Alaster approached the study. Taking Engeström's idea of an activity system as a framing device, he has

presented each subject department's engagement with initial teacher education as an activity and has organised the vast amount of data he gathered using that framing. Consequently, he has been able to interrogate the data to show how tools, such as handbooks, were used and to identify the motives revealed when participants discussed initial teacher education. By analysing each department separately and examining the different meaning systems into which the student teachers were inducted, Alaster also reminds universities just how important it is for partnerships to be more than efficient arrangements for placing students in good schools.

The cultural historical roots of activity theory, of course, offer far more than sets of triangles for organising case studies, as Engeström's own work attests. As I read about the school departments I wanted to know more about the evolution of each department's relationship with the University. It is a cultural historical commonplace that we inhabit the practices shaped by those who have passed this way before us. At the same time we shape those practices as we reconfigure our relationships with them. It was beyond the scope of this study to examine either of these features, but there is more to the Vygotskian legacy. Alaster acknowledges this, noting the wider potential of these resources in his brief, but interesting, account of an intervention study he undertook some time after completing the work discussed here.

But what are the lessons for teacher education? The omission of 'initial' in the previous sentence is deliberate. First, trusting professional relationships are crucial, but they need to be based on more than knowing and liking each other. As teacher educators we need to understand what matters for those we are collaborating with (Edwards, 2010, 2012), what motives we each bring to our joint work on shaping the learning trajectories of student teachers. We know that student teachers over decades have reported being 'torn in two' when this mutual understanding between school and higher education is not there. In Alaster's study we see, for example, what happened when a teacher-mentor did not recognise what matters for the university tutor and used the handbook as a tool to protect the student teacher from the demands being made by the tutor.

This level of detail alerts us to the pressure on student teachers as they move between the demands of university practices and those of schools, even when university practices, as they are here, are geared towards supporting their development as thoughtful and knowledgeable professionals. This observation takes us to the second lesson and Alaster's concluding argument, that there is much to be gained from

stronger connections at an institutional level between school subject departments and university tutor teams. There were examples of strong links in the study, but these were personal rather than institutional.

Here I go beyond Alaster's focus on the activity of initial teacher education, to reflect on how much the wider interests of departments and teams might be served by closer collaborations. At Oxford we have taken these ideas forward in the Education Deanery, also rooted in Vygotskian ideas on learning and teaching (Childs *et al.* 2014; Edwards 2014). The idea is that not only will student teachers find their transitions between university and school to be smoother, departments and tutor teams will gain from the knowledge that circulates in a much wider array of collaborations.

I do recommend this book. I have focused on its implications for how we design teacher education programmes, but it is also an important reference text, capturing many of the debates that have influenced the field and the research that has informed them. School-based teacher education is necessary; Alaster's study tells us we must continue our efforts to ensure that student teachers are given the opportunity to shape themselves as thoughtful and informed professionals while in school.

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1
Introduction

This book considers the learning opportunities for student teachers when they are on school teaching practice. These opportunities are discussed in relation to the changes in student teacher education in the UK and globally. In England, there are increasingly centralised requirements for teacher education partnerships between schools and providers of student teacher education. The changes in teacher education have placed and continue to place schools in a more prominent and influential role with regard to student teacher learning. Research in teacher education highlights the importance of schools in the student teacher learning process and the difficulties inherent in enabling learning opportunities for practitioners and student teachers in the classroom (Edwards *et al.*, 2002). Believing in the need for research evidence to inform practice (Douglas, 2012), the book derives from extensive observations of and interviews with practitioners involved in teacher education. My general approach to the text comes from the need to increase understanding of not only the definition of student teacher learning but how key ideas within the concept are applied to learning opportunities in schools and school subject departments. The book develops and analyses the substantive issue of learning opportunities for student teachers in their teaching practice as well as explores the benefits of a rich ethnographic research process.

Making comparisons in teacher education internationally is difficult as there is little 'consensus on the skills and qualities required to be a teacher' (Sayer, 2009, p. 159). How these skills and qualities can be learnt therefore is very much open to debate:

> There are few certainties in [student] teacher education. Perhaps one of them is that student teachers need to have experience of teaching in a school. (McNally *et al.*, 1997, p. 485)

McNally *et al.*'s study which investigates the support received by student teachers in their school practice concludes by identifying 'a need for greater conceptual and semantic clarity in understanding and describing the school experience' (*ibid.* 497). Traditionally, school practice has been seen as an expectation 'to provide a place for student teachers to practise teaching [and] to try out the practices provided by the university' (Zeichner, 2010, p. 90). Often referred to as field experiences or school practicum, calls have grown in the research literature for a greater integration of the different aspects of teacher education courses by tackling the divide between course content taught in the higher education institution and the practical experience of working in schools (Grossman *et al.*, 2009, Cochran-Smith *et al.*, 2012). Research in school practice has been recognised as playing a determinant role in student teacher education (Caires *et al.*, 2012) as well as in early teacher development (Britzman, 2003, Evelein, Korthagen and Brekelmans, 2008). A review of 54 research articles published between 1990 and 2010 on how school teaching practice contributes to student teacher development in relation to urban contexts highlights the need for research to focus on the situated and mediated nature of student teachers' learning in the field, and criticises previous research as having 'a lack of focus on what pre-service teachers actually learn from such experiences and how' (Anderson and Stillman, 2012, p. 2). It is the importance of the school settings and the learning opportunities they afford student teachers which are the focus of this book. The influence of the higher education institution is seen in the visits of the university tutors to the schools.

My background in education

For twelve years I worked as a teacher and senior manager in four secondary schools. In the year 2000 I became a high school deputy head teacher. After eight years of teaching in the classroom my new leadership role involved working with teaching staff from all subject departments. During my four years in senior school management I had responsibilities for staff development and teaching and learning. I developed an awareness of how school subject department environments differ with regard to their ways of working. As a member of the senior team my weekly timetable comprised regular 'on call' lessons. With the benefit of a two-way radio I could be instantly summoned to classrooms in order to respond to requests of teaching staff. This often involved intervening in lessons where a senior teacher's presence was considered necessary or appropriate. Such incidents usually arose from

situations where pupils refused to follow instructions. After behaving unacceptably pupils sometimes absented themselves from the class-room and on occasions from the school, disappearing over the school fence into the neighbouring housing estate. Although mainly focusing on the negative aspects of classroom teaching my 'on call' sessions illustrated for me the differences in classroom learning environments. Variations were evident in behaviour management strategies and in pupil and staff expectations when engaged in teaching and learning. Such variations often reflected the differences in the subject department environments in the school.

Prior to my senior management role I gained an appreciation of the importance of subject department learning environments in relation to my responsibilities in teacher education. In the 1990s I co-ordinated teacher education activities with student teachers. Three universities had agreements with the school in relation to student teachers' school practice. The student teachers visited the school at various stages in their training. The universities ran different teacher education courses, and I became familiar with the specific requirements of the teacher education partnerships between the universities and the school. At this time the nature of partnership between schools and higher educa-tion institutions in England was realised relatively independently of government directives, which primarily dictated the amount of time to be spent in schools and the number of school practices. My work in student teacher education started to coincide with major reforms to secondary student teacher training announced by the Department of Education (DfE, 1992). These led to a large shift in policy with student teacher education courses in England and Wales becoming school-based by 1994 (Whitty, 2002). Consequently, my career in schools and working with student teachers grew alongside fairly substantial changes made to teacher education.

Partnership in teacher education

The different interpretations of partnership in student teacher educa-tion possibly indicated the different understandings of the nature of teaching and of the relative expertise of teachers and university staff in discussing matters of pedagogy within student teacher education courses. Attempts centrally to make teacher education more consistent post-1992 meant that the broad structure of teacher education courses (the most popular in England being the one-year full-time Postgraduate Certificate of Education, PGCE) shared overall characteristics in different

education institutions, and were seen as having distinctive features. Partnership arrangements suggested that some joint responsibility was given to the school and the university for planning and managing courses. This included the assessment of student teachers. The regulations (Teaching Agency, 2012) stipulate that 24 weeks out of the 36-week Postgraduate Certificate of Education course are to be based in schools for student teachers. A minimum of two schools are used. The structure of the school experience requires a specifically designated school-supervising teacher (often known as a mentor) who arranges and co-ordinates the teaching practice in the subject department with the higher education institution.

In this way:

> The partnership (is) characterised by an intention that university teacher educators and mentors work together to enable students as they progress through the programme to analyse and reflect upon their school experience. (Taylor, 2008, p. 70)

The view here is premised on an idea that there is a shared understanding of how student teachers learn to teach. However, the way teacher education partnerships have been seen to operate differently suggests that this idea is unfounded (Furlong, 2000). Although government policy appears to encourage a consistent approach to student teacher education, the similar features of the student teacher education courses belie the contested purpose of student teacher education work. Indeed, I had noted variations between course objectives in my earlier co-ordinating role with three university teacher education courses.

'Worldwide, many teacher education programs state that they have changed toward a more practice-based curriculum' (Lunenberg and Korthagen, 2009, p. 229). Alongside this have been calls for a greater amount of time that student teachers should spend in schools (see, for example, Ure, 2010, for developments in Australia). A continuing shift to school-based learning in teacher education courses and in many other routes into teaching in England (15% of all new recruits to teaching enter through either an employment-based system or a school-centred programme (House of Commons Report, 2010)) promotes the capabilities of schools to work with unqualified teachers. Innovations with regard to different types of higher education input and subsequently different ways that schools should work with student teachers have continued with numerous policy initiatives (Whitty, 2002, p. 73). Government papers further emphasise the role of the

school in teacher education in England (DfE, 2010a and b, 2011). New partnerships between schools and universities give greater onus to schools to approach universities for the education needs required for newly recruited student teachers. This has meant that funding for teacher education is being opened up, with new opportunities for the responsibility of training increasingly located within the school rather than the higher education institution. A move away from higher education input in student teacher education has also been noted in the USA where 'increasingly, school districts are taking over the task of preparing teachers for their schools' (Grossman, 2008, p. 11).

Teacher education policy

How student teacher education is shaped is often strongly influenced by ideological positions about the nature of schooling and teaching. Governments around the world frequently aim to remove the influence of certain interests in favour of their own (Menter *et al.*, 2006). Research into teacher education policy in the USA indicates that 'policy (and policy proposals) [are] unavoidably political, and that policy making involves contentious debate as well as complicated political maneuvering and strategies' (Cochran Smith *et al.*, 2013, p. 6). Driving teacher education policy in many countries 'has been the growing significance of globalization' (Furlong, 2013, p. 28) and the consequent belief in neoliberal policies. In England, national politics greatly influences teacher education policy, which has been dependent on different governments' interpretations of neoliberalism. In Asia too, the impact of the policy and practices in teacher education are seen to be shaped by 'global forces underpinned by an overriding economically-driven ideology' (Tang, 2011, p. 113). In many European and North American settings teacher education policy has also been affected more by the need to recruit teachers than by longer term planning and thinking (Menter *et al.*, 2006, p. 2). Most schools in England have preferred working with higher education in a partnership model of training (Barker, 1996) with only a few wanting complete responsibility. A concern of teacher education when considered as a problem of policy is that the contexts and cultures of schools and how these 'support or constrain teachers' abilities to use knowledge and resources' are not the focus (Cochran-Smith, 2006, p. 139). Instead, this is replaced with discussions on training and testing 'to ensure that all teachers have basic subject matter knowledge and the technical skills to bring pupils' test scores to minimum thresholds' (*ibid*. 140). Such an apparently rational and

commonsense approach ignores the complexity of the many problems related to teacher education and fails to take account of the settings where learning happens.

The central research study in this book focuses on school settings and presents four secondary school subject departments working with student teachers during their school practice. This research was a year-long ethnographic study and explored teacher education work with fifteen student teachers in the subject departments of Geography, History, Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) and Science. The departments are in one secondary school (for 11- to 18-year-old pupils) in the south of England. The research focused on a one-year Postgraduate Certificate of Education programme at a university in England. The course has consistently been rated as highly successful in the national inspection grade system and course evaluation outcomes. The school in which the student teachers were placed was well regarded for the way its staff worked with the university, and had many connections with the work of the university's teacher education course, with which it had been involved for over fifteen years. Two questions guided my research: first, what were the opportunities for student teacher learning as constructed in the different departments in one school? And second, if not the same, to what extent and why were these learning opportunities constructed differently?

The methodological focus

Ethnographic research

In wanting to appreciate student teachers' learning opportunities in school departments, I believed it was necessary to spend a considerable amount of time in these departments observing and talking to the staff and student teachers working there. During the school year I made 80 visits to the research school in order to appreciate the learning opportunities afforded. Working in an ethnographic way seemed appropriate for such a study. A distinctive feature of ethnography revolves around an appreciation of the 'need to understand the particular cultural worlds in which people live' (Goldbart and Hustler, 2000, p. 16). In this research, transcripts of interviews were considered alongside observation field notes and documentation when analysing the learning opportunities for student teachers in the school subject departments. Data were generated separately and at different times with my perspective as an interviewer, observer and document analyser deciding on data selection and reduction.