

0045

Capturing the object of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) activity

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Background

This presentation is based on research that explores the learning opportunities for student teachers when working in secondary school subject departments. A review of the developments of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in England makes clear contested ideas in relation to the purpose of training teachers for the classroom and how this should be done (Wilkin, 1999; Furlong, 2008; Taylor, 2008). The role of schools and Higher Education in ITE is likely to remain a contestable issue. Numerous entry routes into teaching highlight how varied the aims of ITE can be. Whether centralised government initiatives have developed because of a belief in the enhanced value of training in schools or because of a desire to reduce the hold higher education has had on ITE, the outcome of these has meant that learning opportunities in schools for student teachers are increasingly important as far as their learning is concerned. A growing emphasis on school-based learning is further enforced by employment-based routes into the teaching profession.

This research features the Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE), which is the most popular route into secondary school teaching. The overall structure of the PGCE is centrally imposed on Higher Education Institutions by government policy, and consequently may appear to encourage a consistent approach to ITE. However, this research shows how the similar features of the course still belie the contested purpose of ITE work even within the same school and university partnership, and suggests why this is the case. It also gives recommendations for ITE development in light of its findings.

Research Questions

Previous research has considered the implications for teachers in terms of their new responsibilities since ITE has become more school-based (Stanulis, 1995; Hagger & McIntyre, 2006), but little has been written about how secondary school subject departments as school placements support the learning opportunities of student teachers. Researching what participants do in relation to ITE is important in as far as exploring important aspects of ITE, but this does not necessarily develop understanding of the reasons behind participants' actions. This is where some of the ITE literature falls short, and explanations and understandings of why ITE works in the way it does are only partial. This research questions what the learning opportunities are for student teachers in subject departments, but also goes on to consider why learning opportunities differ between them.

It is widely recognised from research done in secondary schools that subject departments play significant roles in the lives of teachers, and for student teachers when learning in their school placements (Lacey, 1977; Siskin, 1991; Busher & Blease, 2000; Donnelly, 2000; Wildy & Wallace, 2004). Therefore, the research focuses on ITE activity within secondary school subject departments.

Methods

Using data from a year long ethnographic study of a British university PGCE partnership in one secondary school, the learning opportunities of student teachers are compared between four school subject departments (Geography, History, Modern Foreign Languages and Science). The data was generated through participant observation of 62 meetings between student teachers and their mentors, 27 meetings between university tutors, mentors and student teachers, 52 lesson observations with feedback sessions from mentors, 61 interviews with participants involved in ITE (mentors, teachers, student teachers, university tutors and senior school managers) and numerous occasions observing social interaction in subject department 'team rooms'.

Frame

The subsequent data analysis was informed by Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Cole, 1996; Engeström, 2000). The potential strength of a CHAT analysis in trying to address the question of why learning opportunities are differently available to student teachers in subject departments is that it focuses attention on learning as a social phenomenon, a process that takes place within social systems that have evolved culturally and historically and that offer participants in those systems certain physical or psychological tools with which to work on a shared object. A central CHAT concept in this analysis is the idea of an activity's object. This is often described as the true motive of an activity (Leont'ev, 1978). This is evident because it is true to the specific practices in which it is located. Nevertheless, an object is always open to negotiation in an activity like initial teacher education where participants have different opinions and intentions with regards to the activity.

Motives are revealed in how participants interpret and respond to the object. For example, some teachers saw ITE as a way of developing new ways of teaching and learning in the classroom with a wish to extend their own pedagogical knowledge, whilst others primarily wanted to 'give something back' to the profession and greatly enjoyed working with new teachers. Therefore, interpretations of teacher education called forth responses to the objects of activity being worked on with the student teachers. Participants rarely spoke in terms of how the object of ITE activity was constructed. However, for the researcher, understanding how participants saw the object was possible by analysing how participants worked within the departments' ITE activity systems. By 'capturing' the object of ITE activity (activity constantly changes and therefore the object is always in flux) the research reveals aspects of social practices, and supports interpretations of ethnographically generated data.

Research findings

Findings suggested that there were different conceptions of learning in the departments and between participants, but most importantly the analysis indicated why these differences existed. A broad understanding of context was gained through the ethnographic approach and from the use of the CHAT analytic framework, which analysed cultural, social and historical aspects of ITE activity in the school departments.

Recommendations are outlined for how ITE university/school partnerships can broach inevitable differences in how participants see the object in ITE activity. Tensions need to be recognised, seen as productive and negotiated in order to enable student teacher learning opportunities. Because ITE activity is constantly open to change, this can be welcomed as an opportunity for ITE to contribute to the learning of all participants in the ITE activity system, both those working in the school and for the student teachers participating in the PGCE course.