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Transforming teacher education for English – contradictions in the activity system hindering a third-space partnership

Abstract

This paper addresses the theory–practice divide in the Norwegian teacher education programme for years 5–10. We examine to what extent crossing boundaries between the academic knowledge gained in the university and in the practice field can be achieved in the teacher education for English. This boundary crossing is conceptualised as establishing a 'third space' where theory and practice are integrated.

The study uses the second generation of cultural historical activity theory (CHAT), and through a developmental work research (DWR) approach it offers a critical view on the activity system of our current teacher education (TEd) for English for years 5–10. A qualitative document analysis of the national and local documents governing the English courses is carried out. The intention is to illuminate to what extent the documents prescribe, or encourage, that English academic course work is adequately grounded in student teachers' school practice placement.

Tensions are identified at two levels in the current activity system: within the rules factor, i.e., between the national documents and the local plans, as well as between the various local course plans. A lack of coherence is also discovered between the rules and the tools factors in the activity system. This implies that a desired theory-practice integration in the form of a third space is challenging.

A close connection between theory and practice, which is important for establishing the desired consistency and coherence in TEd programmes for English, is lacking. Unless the tensions and contradictions uncovered in our investigation are resolved, it seems unrealistic to expect that a third space connecting theory and practice in TEd for English can be formally established.

Keywords: teacher education for English, activity theory (CHAT), third space, integration of theory and practice

Endre lærerutdanning i engelsk – motsetninger i aktivitetssystemet som hindrer et tredje rom partnerskap

Sammendrag

Denne artikkelen adresserer teori-praksisgapet i Grunnskolelærerutdanning for 5.-10. trinn i Norge. Vi undersøker i hvilken grad avstanden mellom teori og praksis kan reduseres ved å etablere et tredje rom partnerskap mellom teorifeltet (campus) og praksisfeltet (skolen).

Studien er basert på andregenerasjons kulturhistorisk aktivitetsteori, og gjennom en systematisk undersøkelse (DWR) av vårt aktivitetssystem for engelsk for 5.-10. trinn settes det samtidig et kritisk søkelys på systemet. En kvalitativ dokumentanalyse av nasjonale og lokale dokumenter som er retningsgivende for undervisning i engelsk er gjennomført, med den hensikt å undersøke i hvilken grad disse dokumentene foreskriver, eller oppmuntrer, integrering av teori og praksis i lærerutdanning i engelsk.

Det finnes spenninger på to nivå i det nåværende aktivitetssystemet for engelsk: internt i faktoren 'regler', dvs., mellom nasjonale dokumenter og lokale planer, og mellom ulike emneplaner. Det er også manglende koherens mellom faktorene 'regler' og 'redskaper' i aktivitetssystemet som gjør det utfordrende å praktisere et tredje rom.

Den nære forbindelsen mellom teori og praksis, som er nødvendig for god indre sammenheng i lærerutdanningen i engelsk, mangler i dag. Uten at de eksisterende spenningene og motsetningene i aktivitetssystemet løses, kan det virke urealistisk å forvente at et tredje rom som forener 'teori' og 'praksis' kan bli formelt etablert.

Nøkkelord: lærerutdanning i engelsk, aktivitetssteori, tredje rom, integrasjon av teori og praksis

Introduction

In many parts of the world, there is a growing emphasis on school practice placements as part of teacher education (TEd) and on university–school partnerships. Such partnerships are considered appropriate tools for improving professional practice and strengthening the links between university-based and practice-based knowledge about teaching. Partnerships in TEd programmes are suggested as potential solutions to bridge the well-known gap between the theoretical, academic knowledge aimed at in the university and the practice-oriented knowledge gained in practice placements (Lillejord & Børte, 2017, 2014; NOKUT [the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education], 2006; BERA [British Educational Research Association], 2014; NCATE [National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education], 2010; Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Jenset et al., 2018; Zeichner, 2010; McNicholl & Blake, 2013; Holmbukt & Son, 2020). The perennial lack of connection between 'theory' and 'practice'[1] has contributed to

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[1] This article uses the term 'theory' to focus on the diverse forms of academic knowledge and expertise that exist among teacher educators at the university. It also includes the teaching of the

the university maintaining its hegemonic superiority over school practice by claiming the right to define and construct knowledge (Zeichner, 2010; Nguyen, 2020). Schools are relegated to the position of a 'practice field', in which student teachers are to practise what they have studied on campus and practice teachers have little opportunity to contribute to the curriculum design of TEd programmes (Zeichner, 2010; Thorsen, 2016; Holmbukt & Son, 2020).

Despite the widely held belief that professional training is one of the cornerstones of student teachers' preparation, Norwegian TEd programmes have also been criticised for not being adequately grounded in the work of classroom instruction (NOKUT, 2006; Jenset et al., 2018; Lund & Eriksen, 2016; Jakhelln & Postholm, 2022). For example, the lack of theory-practice integration in the English subject has been reported by Moi et al. (2014), following a national examination of five institutions for teacher education in Norway. According to Moi et al. (2014), only two out of five institutions make an explicit connection to practice through course requirements or evaluation forms in the English course plans that were examined. As university teachers of English, we have also experienced criticism for the lack of theory-practice connection in our courses, given that student teachers constantly desire more practice-based course content that is relevant to their future as English teachers (Holmbukt & Son, 2017, 2020).

Previous research argues that student teachers of English do not feel competent enough in teaching, for example, topics in English linguistics, and that they also lack the necessary didactic skills. English grammar may be perceived as theoretical and difficult to understand, among both L1 and L2 learners (Hadjioannou & Hutchinson, 2010; Hestnes, 2011), which would make teaching harder. Experience from our own teaching and previous research (Holmbukt & Son, 2017) suggests that making the explicit connections to practice through authentic teaching trials in classrooms, for example in English grammar and didactics, strengthens both the student teachers' didactic skills and their understanding of theory (see also Næss et al. (2015)).

In a practice-based TEd course design for English where such explicit connections to practice are made, equal weight could be given to academic content and teaching practice. The epistemology of crossing the boundaries between the fields of academic knowledge (theory) and practice would facilitate university–school collaboration and encourage equal responsibilities for TEd from both parties (Cuenca et al., 2011; Harfitt & Chow, 2018; Jenset et al., 2018; Jónsdóttir, 2015; Klein et al., 2013; Williams, 2014; Zeichner, 2010). Establishing a university-school partnership with equal responsibilities would be in line with the intentions of the current TEd programmes in Norway.

Norwegian TEd at the master's level for primary and lower-secondary education comprises three different programmes: Master of Education years 8–13, Master

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various courses in the TEd for English. Similarly, 'practice' refers to the knowledge and expertise among teachers in schools, including practical classroom work.

of Education years 1–7, and Master of Education years 5–10. For the programme for years 5-10, under which this study is carried out, students are expected to take courses in teaching subjects (e.g., English), subject didactics, pedagogy, and practice placement as well as courses related to research and development (R&D) competence. The programme is intended to deliver TEd of high quality by ensuring 'comprehensiveness and correlation between subjects, subject didactics, pedagogy and practice placement' in close interactions with local schools (Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 1).

Recognising that academic knowledge and practice placement are of equal importance in Ted, and leveraging previous discussions on how a practice-based TEd for English can improve the quality of education (Zeichner, 2010; Jahreie, 2012; Holmbukt & Son, 2020), the present study seeks to investigate to what extent it is currently possible to formally implement collaborative partnerships between theory and practice in order to strengthen student teachers' skills in teaching English. By using activity theory as an analysis tool (Engeström, 1987/2015; Postholm, 2015), the study seeks to analyse our current activity system of TEd for English and identify tensions that may challenge the practice of a dynamic partnership (which we call a 'third space' from now on).

The article offers a critical perspective on the activity system of our TEd for English within the Primary and Lower Secondary Teacher Education Programme for Years 5–10. It illuminates the scope of action for establishing a third space in which academic content and practice in English are better integrated, thus facilitating a TEd where theory acts in concert with practice. The intention of this paper is therefore to contribute to the discussion on theory and practice integration in TEd for English by shedding light on contradictions that may hinder such productive integration in, and perhaps beyond, our own institution. Our research question is: *To what extent does TEd for English make boundary crossing between the domains of theory and practice possible?*

The paper is organised as follows: The next section presents the theoretical background the present study is built on, and thus discusses the concepts of a third space and the framework of the cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) the study adopts. The following section outlines the methodology – a developmental work research (DWR) approach and a qualitative document analysis. Then the findings are presented. The discussion and the conclusion point out tensions and contradictions in our activity system for English which to date challenge a fully integrated TEd for English.

Third Space

According to 'Teacher Education 2025 – National Strategy for Quality and Cooperation in Teacher Education' (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2018), a primary goal for the period until 2025 is to establish a constructive collaboration between TEd institutions and schools where student teachers undertake their practice placement. As teacher educators, we have tried university–school collaboration as part of some English courses through a strategy which has gradually been developed and reinterpreted as a third space (see Holmbukt & Son, 2017, 2020). We have thus sought to create stronger connections to practice, in the form of a third space, where theory and practice are seen as equally important elements instead of competing discourses of TEd (Daza et al., 2021; Zeichner, 2010; BERA, 2014; Cuenca et al., 2011; Jenset et al., 2018; Jónsdóttir, 2015; Klein et al., 2013; NCATE, 2010; Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2018; Williams, 2014; Holmbukt & Son, 2020).

The concept of a 'third space' originated in Bhabha's (2004) postcolonial discussion on cultural hybridity and was later introduced into the discourse on professional practice in teacher education (see, for example, Zeichner, 2010; Klein et al., 2013). In the present context, a third space is a platform that brings together pupils, student teachers, practice teachers and university teachers in collaborative partnerships. The goal is to encourage a non-hierarchical status among the educators engaged in TEd for English, which may open new forms of activities and engagement in learning (Daza et al., 2021; Holmbukt & Son, 2020).

Although a growing body of research emphasises the importance of third spaces as models for professional practice, the process of working towards a symmetrical relationship between university teachers and practice teachers may be challenging. Universities have traditionally represented the authority in the relationship and the source of knowledge, but in a third space the participants should come together in a relationship of mutual benefit and respect. The participants are thus required to renegotiate their professional identities, which also implies reconceptualising and balancing previous power relations (Thorsen, 2016; Zeichner, 2010; Clarke et al., 2013; Daza et al., 2021). Tensions may arise out of the processes of defining the participants' roles in the third space, and continuous negotiations among the participants are therefore needed for TEd programmes that aim to establish a well-functioning third space partnership. (Daza et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2014).

Despite some remaining challenges and dilemmas concerning the operationalisation of a third space in TEd, the partnership collaboration may have the capacity to bring about epistemological changes to academic content or curricula (Moje et al., 2004). This is because the third space is 'a transformative space' (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 152; Lund & Eriksen, 2016) where the participants work together to improve the quality of TEd, and which ultimately has the capacity to change the practice of TEd. Establishing a third space in TEd thus

requires a drastic change, not only in the way university courses are organised, but also in the mindset of the participants involved regarding how theory and practice can be integrated. Making changes in the current system of TEd for the English curriculum, rooted in a third space partnership, calls for an analysis of the curriculum to examine to what extent it facilitates productive school–university collaboration.

CHAT

In our quest to identify and understand which factors may impact on the work of a university–school partnership, the present study draws upon the perspectives of the second generation of CHAT (Engeström, 1987/2015; Postholm, 2015). CHAT offers a framework for analysing and understanding complex work environments and can be used to facilitate change and development in organisations.

 CHAT has evolved over decades, from Vygotsky's fundamental ideas on personal development through mediated social interaction, to Engeström's activity system model of developing collective processes. As seen in Figure 1 below, the activity system includes subject, mediating artefacts/tools, object/outcome, rules, community, and division of labour (Engeström, 2001; Postholm, 2015).
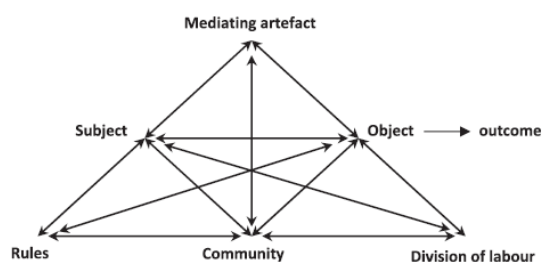

Figure 1. The complete activity system (Engeström, 1987, 1999, 2001).

Human activity is visualised by triadic relations (Figure 1), which coexist and work in relation to each other. For example, the subject's action (the subject being the participants of the activity) is influenced by other elements, such as a) the rules, which include the norms and conventions regulating the activity in the workplace, and b) the mediating artefacts, that is, tools such as course plans and schedules. The mediating artefacts function as intermediary aids used by the subject in the process of achieving c) the object or desired outcome of the activity (Engeström, 1999, Postholm, 2015; Virkkunen & Newnham, 2013). Thus, human activity always takes place within d) a community, which refers to the participants working towards the same goal in an activity, and which is governed by a specific

e) division of labour between the people belonging to the community (Engeström, 1987/2015; Postholm, 2015). The triangular model of an activity system is thus an instrument not only used for examining organisations or workplaces, but also for modelling/redefining the activity system itself. Hence, the triangular model serves a double function in being both an instrument and a goal of analysis of TEd for English: it is an instrument of analysis that may discover 'systemic roots of specific but recurring problems and disturbances [which] are traced and conceptualized as inner contradictions in the structure of the activity' (Virkkunen & Newnham, 2013, p. 16). The contradictions emerge because of changes to one or more factors in the system, which cause disturbances in the activity system since the factors in the system are in mutual relationship with each other. Tensions and contradictions that emerge are therefore seen as the means of change, since a system's development is characterised by continuous transformations between the factors within the activity system (Postholm, 2015). Human interaction therefore remains a fundamental factor in CHAT, recognising that the development of an individual's knowledge and understanding of an activity happens through a collective, collaborative process, rather than in isolation (Postholm, 2015; Engeström, 2001).

Participants collaborate with an aim to construct new practices, or new forms of work activity. The new practices can be revisions of existing practices but can also involve reconceptualising relationships among the participants in new and different ways of working (Dracup et al., 2020; Engeström, 2001; Virkkunen & Newnham, 2013). Engeström (2001) calls such qualitative changes 'expansive transformations in activity systems' (p. 137). The transformations are caused by collective processes, where the participants analyse and discuss their system of work practices, and through the cycles of analysis the object and outcome of the activity may be reconceptualised. Reconceptualisation thus involves constructing a new form of activity by expanding 'beyond the boundaries of the previous form of the activity' (Virkkunen & Newnham, 2013, p. 11) and embracing 'a radically wider horizon of possibilities than in the previous mode of the activity' (Engeström, 2001, p. 137).

According to Engeström (1999, 2001), this expansion of knowledge may be seen as the equivalent of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) discussed by Vygotsky (1978) at the level of individual learning. Vygotsky (1978) defined an individual's ZPD as 'the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers' (Vygotsky, cited in Virkkunen & Newnham, 2013, p. 38). Hence, Vygotsky discusses how social collaboration benefits the learning of the individual, whereas Engeström (1999, 2001; Virkkunen & Newnham, 2013) aims to employ the ZPD in developing collective activities. Qualitative transformations in collective activities may emerge when individual participants begin to question the established norms of an activity and

further develop into a collective effort to reconceptualise the object of the activity. Engeström's reconceptualisation thus defines the ZPD as 'the distance or the area between the individually experienced present and collectively generated foreseeable future' (Engeström, 2000, p. 157).

Method

The methodology applied in the present study[2] consists of a DWR approach developed in the framework of CHAT (Engeström & Engeström, 1986) and a qualitative document analysis. DWR approaches are conducted through data analysis workshops known as Change Laboratories (CLs) (Engeström et al., 1996) which may both stimulate and study the processes of change in developing organisations and work environments, in the present case, TEd for the English subject. Over the past years, we have become increasingly aware of the various factors decisive for a more theory-practice integrated curriculum in TEd for English in the form of a third space. Such an awareness has led us to question and analyse our current activity system which aims to better integrate theory and practice.

The DWR methodology and its CHAT tools were thus applied by carrying out a CL following the analysis procedure as outlined in Virkkunen and Newnham (2013, pp. 18–20). The CL shed light on the development of academic practices over time, yielding activity system models of the past and present structures of TEd for English (see Figure 2 in 'Findings'). The result of investigating our activity system revealed the existence of specific tensions in the system. This led to the investigation of the official national and local documents governing the academic practices of all the English subject courses in the TEd programme for years 5–10, to identify possible tensions that might hinder the desired integration between theory and practice. A qualitative, inductive document analysis (Krippendorff, 2004; Grønmo, 2004) of the 16 documents (see Appendix) currently governing the TEd English courses of the 5–10 programme in our institution was carried out with the intention of illuminating the extent to which the documents prescribe, or encourage, that English academic course work is adequately grounded in the work of classroom instruction (NOKUT, 2006; Jenset et al., 2018; Lund & Eriksen, 2016; Jakhelln & Postholm, 2022).

The content of each of the 16 documents, giving instruction and directions for TEd, made natural units of analysis (Krippendorff, 2004; Grønmo, 2011). A hermeneutist approach was applied in the analysis, aiming to achieve a richer understanding of the various factors that influence our current work practice (Gadamer, 2004; Bratberg, 2014). The analysis started by a full-text reading of each document, which implied an interaction with the text by skimming as the

first stage of reading, followed by close reading (i.e., scanning) and, finally, a stage of interpreting formulations. The process of collecting data was thus to register and analyse formulations pointing in the direction of theory and practice integration as part of the TEd for English. The details were filled in a Word file including the title of the documents. This resulted in an overview of the data gained from all the documents which facilitated a cross-document comparison. The first document to be examined was the national document Regulations Relating to the Framework Plan for Primary and Lower Secondary Teacher Education for Years 5–10 (hereafter: the Framework Plan) (Ministry of Education and Research, 2016), whose purpose is to ensure a high-quality, integrated professional TEd programme. Two editions of the Framework Plan were analysed: the original document in Norwegian and its English translation.

The Framework Plan forms the basis of the second national document under investigation, namely the national guidelines for the primary and lower secondary TEd programme for years 5–10 (hereafter: the national guidelines) (the National Council for Teacher Education (NRLU), 2016). The national guidelines complement the regulations in the Framework Plan and 'are intended to ensure a teacher education programme that is coordinated at a national level and that satisfies the quality requirements for the primary and lower secondary teacher education programme' (NRLU, 2016, p. 6).

The Framework Plan and the national guidelines are prescriptive for the institutions' provision of TEd programmes, including the TEd programme plan for years 5–10, which is the third document for analysis (local plan on the institutional level, UiT, 2016/2021). The programme plan is supposed to describe content, practice placement, organisation, work methods and assessment (NRLU, 2016). It should also ensure a TEd programme 'with comprehensiveness and correlation between theory and practice placement, between subjects and subject didactics, and between subjects' (Ministry of Education and Research, 2016, p. 5).

Finally, four course plans for the school practice in the local TEd programme were studied, along with five English subject course plans and four course plans for research and development (R&D) competence (for the full overview, see Appendix). The courses related to R&D are a series of courses intended to build students' R&D competence and skills and thus relate to all subjects, including English.

Findings

CHAT was used as a research lens to study the complexities of our practice. The CL we carried out shed light on the development of academic practices over time, thus yielding activity system models of the past and present structures of TEd for English. The CL uncovered possible tensions in our activity system. The triangle

to the left in Figure 2 below shows the central features of the past structure of our activity as teacher educators, and the triangle to the right displays the central changes taking place in the current activity system.
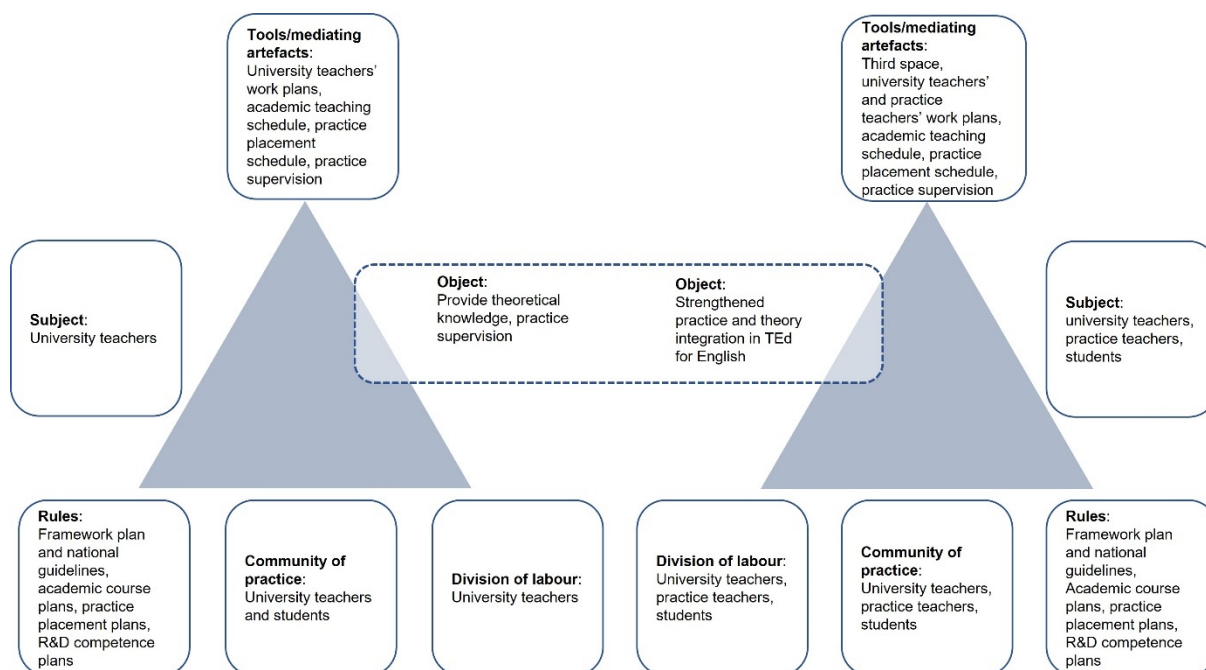

Figure 2: The central features of the past and present structures of the activity.

In the past activity system, the intended object is to provide student teachers with theoretical knowledge of the English subject and to supervise their practice placement once a year. The university teacher constitutes the subject. The activity is mediated by artefacts such as the university teacher's work plan and the schedules for teaching and practice placement for students; the rules, or guidelines, of the activity constitute the Framework Plan, the national guidelines, the plans for the academic course, practice placement and R&D competence. Regarding the division of labour, only the university teachers of the courses are involved, whereas the community includes university teachers and student teachers.

The triangle to the right in the diagram illustrates our current activity system. The desired outcome is strengthened practice and theory integration in TEd for English. One way of reaching that goal is by practising a third space (Holmbukt & Son, 2017, 2020; Zeichner, 2010; Cuenca et al., 2011; Klein et al., 2013). Thus, 'third space' is introduced as an additional mediating artefact in the current activity system and operates as a method and tool to achieve a balanced involvement of theory and practice. The introduction of the third space will naturally impact the formation of 'the subject', which now includes the three parties of the third space: university teachers, practice teachers and student teachers of English. Both 'the community' and 'the division of labour' encompass the same stakeholders involved – the three parties of the third space.

The analysis indicates that all the factors in the current activity system have changed with a reconfigured object, while the rules factor remains unchanged. The relationship between the unchanged element of the system, namely the rules, and the changed elements (the introduction of a third space) suggests an inner contradiction in the system (Virkkunen & Newnham, 2013): the current activity system tries to practise a third space which aims at giving equal weight to the elements theory and practice, but depends on the rules of the past activity system in which theory and practice are not seen as equal components in TEd for English. Thus, in order to scrutinise to what extent the rules in the current activity system allow, or encourage, the implementation of a third space as a mediating artefact, it was necessary to examine all the documents that provide a framework for planning and organising the TEd for English, which we turn to in the next section. The documents are: Two national documents, 'Regulations Relating to the Framework Plan for Primary and Lower Secondary Teacher Education for Years 5–10' and 'National guidelines for the primary and lower secondary teacher education programme for Years 5–10', one institutional document 'The programme plan for the primary and lower secondary teacher education for years 5–10', and various local course plans: five English subject course plans, four course plans for R&D competence, and four course plans for practice placement, as outlined below.

Regulations Relating to the Framework Plan for Primary and Lower Secondary Teacher Education for Years 5–10

The national regulations for framing TEd (Ministry of Education and Research, 2016, p. 1) clearly emphasise a theory–practice integration. For example, in their scope and objective, it is stated that 'the teacher education programme should be of a high academic quality and ensure comprehensiveness and correlation between subjects, subject didactics, pedagogy and practice placement as well as close interaction with professional practice and with the communities of which schools are a part'.

Practice is given a coequal position with the other elements of the programme. In paragraph 3, section 8, the content and structure of practice are outlined:

> The practice placement should comprise at least 110 days of supervised, varied and assessed practice. … The practice placement should be an integrated element in all subjects forming part of the programme. The practice period should be spread across different stages of Years 5–10 in primary/lower secondary, it should be adapted to the students' chosen subjects, and it should help the students develop the ability to reflect on and develop their teaching practices (Ministry of Education and Research, 2016, p. 5).

National guidelines for the primary and lower secondary teacher education programme for Years 5–10

The national guidelines intend to ensure the overall coherence of the TEd programme, and chapters 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6 comment on connections between theory and practice. Firstly, it is claimed that one of the responsibilities of TEd institutions is to stimulate theory and practice integration and 'ensure binding collaboration between the teacher educators at the teacher education institution and the practical training' (NRLU, 2016, p. 6). It is further stated that 'the institutions must ensure coherence between activities at the teacher education institution and in teaching practice' (p. 6).

Secondly, the section on 'content' claims that each subject and its practice placement are responsible for providing student teachers with necessary competence and skills to perform the complex tasks of the teaching profession: 'pedagogy and pupil-related skills, teaching subjects and teaching practice shall be linked closely together in a way that ensures coherence and progress in the education' (NRLU, 2016, p. 8). This involves close collaboration between subjects and teaching practice about a variety of work methods and assessment forms which will benefit the students' learning.

Thirdly, as regards the organisation of practice placement, it is stated that 'the teacher education institutions have a chief responsibility for the content, quality and assessment of teaching practice. In order to ensure progress between the periods of teaching practice 'the practice school must organise the teaching practice in accordance with the TEd programme descriptions' (NRLU, 2016, p. 13). Additionally, it is stated that the formal agreement between the university and schools includes collaboration forums and development of competence in both parties.

Fourthly, in its section on teaching practice, the NRLU (2016) claims that practice placement has an integral function in TEd and depends on collaboration and dialogue between the three parties: students, subject teachers and practice teachers. It is important to provide a 'close connection between content and work methods in teacher education subjects and teaching practice', and 'teaching practice shall ensure a … connection to the teaching of subjects' (NRLU, 2016, p. 15). Finally, the guidelines state that 'the teaching practice shall be an arena for systematic learning and practice, in that the practice teacher works with the teacher education institution to facilitate learning through practice situations and supervision' (p. 15).

The programme plan for the primary and lower secondary teacher education for years 5–10

The programme plan for the primary and lower secondary teacher education for years 5–10 on the institutional level (UiT, 2016/2021) outlines an integrated programme of professional study. This implies that teaching subjects, didactics

and practice placement are connected throughout the course of the education, in terms of contents, structure and organisation.

The programme plan acknowledges practice placement as an important learning arena for professionally oriented education, and it is considered an integral part of the teaching subjects. It further states that the assignments given in the subjects presuppose a strong connection to practice. Thus, the practice teacher is obliged, through guidance and follow-up, to contribute to the development of the student teachers' professional competence in collaboration with the university teachers.

Five English subject course plans

Five English subject course plans which are part of the TEd for years 5–10 have been studied (see Appendix). All have a separate subsection of the document called 'Practice'. In all five plans, this subsection consists of one sentence: 'For further information about practice, see separate practice plan'. In addition to this standardised formulation, three of the five course plans have formulations that may point in the direction of practice integration. The following are examples.

- 'The course involves both a basic introduction to analytical and theoretical approaches to text, genre, reading and context, and the application of the texts in didactic practice' (UiT, 2022a).
- 'Throughout the study, professional knowledge, language skills and didactic competence are developed through testing in practice' (UiT, 2022a).
- 'It is intended that the students will have their competence tested in practice' (UiT, 2022b).
- 'Throughout the study, professional knowledge, language skills and didactic competence are developed through testing in practice.' The following work requirement also applies: 'Based on their practice portfolio and assessment reports, a coherent text (1000–1500 words) must be written, where professional literature is used, reflecting on their professional development as teachers in the master's subject' (i.e., English) (UiT, 2022d).

Two course plans (UiT, 2022c, e) do not refer to any activities related to practice placement apart from the standardised reference 'For further information about practice, see separate practice plan'.

Four course plans for R&D competence

The four course plans for R&D competence were studied. In their first year, students carry out observation of a practice teacher within their own teaching subject and a research interview about being a professional teacher (UiT, 2022f). In the second year, students write an individual text in the teaching subject (for

example, English) about a chosen pupil with a particular focus on basic skills and adapted teaching (UiT, 2022g). Concerning these two courses, no formulations clearly point in the direction of integrating theory and practice; however, it is assumed that the objectives of the courses require academic knowledge gained at the university.

In the third year, the students learn about academic review and are expected to review the research literature of a specific topic (UiT, 2022h). During the third year, they also write an R&D assignment linked to their master's subject and to pedagogy and pupil knowledge. The students develop their R&D project in collaboration with the practice teacher, practice group and subject teacher at the university, and they plan, implement and evaluate a small-scale R&D project in their own practice (UiT, 2022i). The R&D assignment is thus an example of learning through collaborative processes with the three parties involved.

Four course plans for practice placement

The four local plans for practice placement in the TEd for years 5–10 have two standardised formulations about integration of theory and practice or collaboration between practice teachers and teachers at the university. They are found in all four course plans: 1) 'Students must have planning and teaching assignments within their own teaching subjects but must also be prepared to teach other subjects', and 2) 'The practice teacher assesses and determines the grade in practice as passed/failed in collaboration with the subject teacher from the university' (UiT, 2022j-m). In addition to these formulations, the plans for practice placement imply the integration of theory and practice in an indirect way. For example, during practice placement in the first year (UiT, 2022j), students are supposed to build competence in planning, implementing and evaluating teaching under the guidance of a practice teacher. To fulfil that objective, it is assumed that students will apply knowledge gained in the university courses. In their second year of practice placement (UiT, 2022k), the focus is on the pupils' learning. Under guidance of a practice teacher, the student teachers alternately concentrate on learning for the full class and for a specific pupil. During the third year (UiT, 2022l), the student will explore the practice school as a starting point for an R&D assignment in collaboration with the practice teacher and subject teachers from the university. The fourth year of practice placement (UiT, 2022m) aims at developing the teacher students' professional, pedagogical platform as well as their skills as leaders of learning processes. Theory and practice are integrated to some extent, as the students in their spring semester practice placement must plan and carry out a teaching scheme in the subject English, which is to be evaluated as part of the English course on campus.

Discussion

The two national documents, the national Framework Plan (Ministry of Education and Research, 2016) and the national guidelines for the primary and lower secondary teacher education programme for years 5–10 (NRLU, 2016) include instructions for the design of the programme plan and for high academic quality of the TEd programme for years 5–10. Central preconditions for quality seem to be 1) a robust coherence among the different components of the education – the teaching subjects, subject didactics, pedagogy, practice placement and activities in the teaching subject and practice placement – and 2) mandatory collaboration between the university teachers and practice teachers about content and work methods. The collaboration between the educators in the two arenas seems to be imperative for facilitating systematic learning through practice situations and supervision and implies a coequal position of theory and practice (Zeichner, 2010; Laughlin, 2021; BERA, 2014; Cuenca et al., 2011; Jenset et al., 2018; Jónsdóttir, 2015; Klein et al., 2013; NCATE, 2010; Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2018; Williams, 2014; Holmbukt & Son, 2020). The mutual relationship between theory and practice, as in a third space (Daza et al., 2021), and the joint responsibility for the student teachers' education, mandated by the national guidelines, may imply that theory and practice should not be seen as competing discourses – 'an either/or perspective' – but more as a 'both/also point of view' (Zeichner, 2010, p. 92). In other words, establishing a third space in TEd – a partnership between theory and practice – is in fact mandated in the Framework Plan and the national guidelines.

However, concurrent to encouraging a balanced relationship between theory and practice, the national guidelines have formulations that imply an imbalance of power between teacher educators at university and practice teachers. According to the national guidelines, the institutions for TEd are seen to bear the chief responsibility for the content, quality and assessment of practice placement, and the practice school must organise the practice according to the description of the TEd programme. Thus, cooperation on these grounds reflects a relationship of power in which the university represents the authority, and the practice school is the cooperating partner. This indicates that the cooperation and distribution of power between universities and schools may still face challenges if the theory field is seen as "maintaining hegemony over the construction and dissemination of knowledge" (Zeichner, 2010, p. 90) for TEd in Norway (See also Daza et al., 2021). The underlying perception of the university having dominance over the content and structure of TEd may be counterproductive to maintaining a third space as part of an activity system for English and other subjects alike (Ohnstad & Munthe, 2008; Zeichner, 2010; Clarke et al., 2013; Thorsen, 2016; Holmbukt & Son, 2020).

The institutional document, the programme plan for years 5–10, aims to describe how the institution ensures an integrated TEd with correlations among

subjects, subject didactics and practice placement (Ministry of Education and Research, 2016). The programme plan (UiT, 2016/2021) recognises the importance of practice as an integral part of the subjects. The plan explicitly states that assignments given in the subjects presuppose a strong connection to practice but does not state how this connection could be achieved. By failing to do so, it leaves it up to the educators to decide how the connection to practice is to be realised and to what extent coherence between campus courses and practice is provided (Canrinus et al., 2019; Jahreie, 2012; Grossman et al., 2008). The programme plan states that practice teachers and university educators are obliged to collaborate on student teachers' development and learning, yet, again, does not clearly communicate in which ways the collaboration is to be practised. Hence, the vague formulations about coherence and collaboration between university teachers and practice teachers may result in collaboration arrangements which are less robust than intended in the Framework Plan (Ministry of Education and Research, 2016) and the national guidelines (NRLU, 2016). This will also provide a less robust foundation for practising a third space.

The documents on the national and institutional level indicate that theory–practice integration is a mandatory part of teacher education, although how such integration is to be achieved is not specified. Regarding the course plans for the English subject and for practice placement, the theory–practice integration is barely visible. This creates contradictions between the rules that govern TEd on a national/institutional level and those with which university teachers comply in designing course contents. All the English subject course plans have a standardised formulation, 'for further information about practice, see separate practice plan', which is one of the few explicit references to practice placement and to which, in our own experience, university teachers pay little attention. Likewise, the plans for practice placement include a standard formulation: 'Students are going to have planning and teaching assignments within their own teaching subjects but must also be prepared to teach other subjects'. These two standard formulations may not provide a satisfactory foundation for the integration of theory and practice, which contradicts the underlying condition for TEd mandated by the national guidelines, namely the 'close connection between content and work methods in teacher education subjects and teaching practice' (NRLU, 2016, p. 15).

The first- and second-year course plans for the R&D competence also seem to lack the element of theory–practice integration, as student teachers are not necessarily expected to apply theoretical knowledge in their teaching but simply carry out assignments focused on either a teacher or observation of a class. In the third year (UiT, 2022i), however, the students write an 8000-word R&D assignment which combines one of the teaching subjects (for example, English) and pedagogy. A basic requirement is that the assignment must demonstrate a close relation to practice, that is, integration of theory in the teaching subject and professional teaching practice. In other words, this assignment follows the

intentions in the Framework Plan (Ministry of Education and Research, 2016) and the national guidelines (NRLU, 2016), which require correlations between the subjects, didactics, pedagogy and practice placement, as well as a binding collaboration between stakeholders involved in the TEd. In our view, this is what constitutes a third space (Zeichner, 2010, Daza et al., 2021, Holmbukt & Son, 2020).

The integration of theory and practice in course plans, or a lack thereof, can influence student teachers' learning outcomes. Both theoretical and practical aspects of any topic under study should be illuminated. For example, when learning the concept of 'instructional scaffolding', student teachers would benefit from having opportunities to enact scaffolding in a teaching context after having been introduced to the theoretical concept of the term. This would allow a deeper understanding of the concept and of the complexity of teaching and learning (Grossman et al., 2009; Canrinus et al., 2019). In TEd for English, the student teachers are expected to develop their skills in a range of subject areas. The following are examples of learning outcome descriptions from two of the courses: Student teachers' skills are, among others, to be able 'to plan and lead varied and differentiated learning activities', 'develop the pupils' language learning competence' (UiT, 2022b) and 'give adapted feedback and use formative assessment … to guide pupils in their learning of English' (UiT, 2022c). Since the student teachers are expected to develop their skills and competence in the English subject courses, a critical question might be raised regarding to what extent the skills are acquired in a learning environment on campus, where contact with authentic teaching and learning situations is lacking. Likewise, the standard formulation in the plans for practice placement[3] indicates a linkage between theory and practice but, on the other hand, does not prevent that teaching experiences may still be developed without clear goals and purposeful connections with university coursework (Grossman et al., 2008). Thus, a consistent dialogue between theory and practice in a third space will facilitate student teachers' understanding and learning, as opposed to a scenario where practice experiences do not reflect – or, even worse, contradict – what they learn in the university courses (Grossman et al., 2008). Clearly, there is insufficient coherence between the course plans for the English subject and the plans for practice placement in the TEd for English. This lack of coherence among the course plans involved in educating English student teachers thus creates not only a tension in trying to practise a third space but also contradictions with the national guidelines for TEd. The national guidelines state that 'the wording of the learning outcomes for teaching practice must be seen in relation to the wording of the learning outcomes for the teacher education subjects. Providing content and ensuring progress in teaching practice is a joint responsibility' (NRLU, 2016, p. 15).

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[3] i.e., 'Students must have planning and teaching assignments within their own teaching subjects but must also be prepared to teach other subjects' (UiT, 2022j-m).

Concluding remarks

The present study investigates to what extent it is currently possible to formally implement a collaborative third space in TEd for English. We have examined the past and present activity systems for the TEd programme for English (for years 5-10) in our institution, using activity theory as an analysis tool to identify tensions that may challenge the practice of a third space (Engeström, 1987/2015; Postholm, 2015). As a result of our analysis, tensions were discovered at two levels in the present system: 1) Within the rules factor of the activity system, there is a lack of coherence among the Framework Plan, the national guidelines and the programme plan, on the one hand, and the various course plans, on the other. There is also incoherence among the various course plans, that is, those for the academic courses, practice placements and R&D competence. 2) We also discovered incoherence between the rules and the tools factors of the present system.

A third space is considered a structural feature for encouraging, or maintaining, collaboration between theory and practice. The third space is a qualitative, structural change in the tools factor of the current activity system which can provide coherence through the alignment of assignments, activities and experiences across campus coursework and practice placement (Grossman et al., 2008; Jahreie, 2012). Thus, for the process of learning to teach, the present study argues that structural features, such as a close connection between theory and practice, are significant in establishing the desired consistency and coherence in TEd programmes for English (Næss et al., 2015; Jahreie, 2012; Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2018).

If TEd were transformed into a closer partnership with schools, it might remedy the lack of connection and coherence between theory and practice for the English subject, which would better prepare the student teachers for teaching the parts of the subject they find particularly challenging, for example, English grammar (Hadjioannou & Hutchinson, 2010; Holmbukt & Son, 2017). A third-space partnership may scaffold student teachers' development and understanding of the connections between the domains of theory and practice. The third space thus replaces a tendency of leaving student teachers to work out the connections between 'knowledge studied' and 'knowledge tried out' by themselves (McNicholl & Blake, 2013; Næss et al., 2015; Jahreie, 2010; Holmbukt & Son, 2017, 2020; Laughlin, 2021). TEd has a central role in the improvement of educational practices, and efforts to strengthen theory and practice integration in the form of a third space may thus be of universal relevance. Universities have an important contribution to make, as they are advanced in their capacity for knowledge mobilisation, and schools are well established in terms of professional development (Holmbukt & Son, 2017, 2020; McNicholl & Blake, 2013).

Despite the expected advantages of working in a third-space partnership, the analysis of the current activity system of TEd for English demonstrates that developing a third space as a tool creates tensions in the system. The activity

system does not provide a framework for an approach to TEd which is based in practice and where students learn from both the theoretical and the practical part of the subject English. The Framework Plan and national guidelines seem to require a strong connection between theory and practice. However, regarding the courses examined in the present study, the problem lies in the various course plans, which seem to be rather detached from the national documents and the institutional programme plan. In other words, there is weak coherence between the national documents (the Framework Plan and national guidelines) and the local plans, and there also emerges insufficient interaction between the local plans for the academic courses and the local plans for practice placement.

It may thus be concluded that the Framework Plan and national guidelines which outline the TEd for English present valuable intentions about the integration of theory and practice; however, to date such intentions have not been fully reflected in the course plans. Unless the tensions between the national framework documents and the local plans are resolved, it seems unrealistic to expect that boundary crossings between 'theory' and 'practice' can be formally established in TEd for English. Our study therefore contributes to the national and international recognition of 'third spaces' as being one way of strengthening the long-standing gap between theory and practice in TEd. However, to achieve a successful implementation of a sustainable third space in TEd for English, there are barriers to overcome.

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Appendix

The following documents were studied:

1. The Norwegian National Framework Plan for TEd 5–10 in two editions: the English translation and the Norwegian original,

Regulations Relating to the Framework Plan for Primary and Lower Secondary Teacher Education for Years 5–10.
https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/c454dbe313c1438b9a965e84cec47364/forskrift-om-rammeplan-for-grunnskolelarerutdanning-for-trinn-5-10---engelsk-oversettelse.pdf (English translation)

Forskrift om rammeplan for grunnskolelærerutdanning for trinn 5-10 - Lovdata (Norwegian edition of the National Framework Plan)

2. The national guidelines for the primary and lower secondary teacher education programme for years 5–10
*national_guidelines_for_the_primary_and_lower_secondary_teacher_education_programme_for_years_5_10.pdf (uhr.no)

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