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D. M. Murison  
*La Trobe University*

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## THE TEACHERS OF THE ENGLISH TEACHER: THE INFLUENCE OF THE SCHOOL, THE COMMUNITY AND THE TRAINING INSTITUTION

by D.M. Murison  
La Trobe University

At the moment, teacher educators are being forced to contemplate their contribution to the making of a good teacher more seriously than before. Those who feel most vulnerable are the method teachers, since the failures of students in their first year of teaching are most often attributed to the method teacher. The educational psychologists and sociologists, the comparative educationists, and the educational administration experts have other tasks to perform, but the method tutor, although he/she may have other areas of expertise, is there to teach the teacher how and what to teach. According to popular belief, he/she does not do this very effectively, since the schools are said to be full of ill-prepared teachers, and those in their first year reputedly feel that they might as well not have had any training at all, for the good it does them.

Evidence indicates that new teachers want more practical advice on teaching materials and classroom procedures, at least in their first year, and feel that training courses should have given these (*Arizona English Bulletin*, 1977, pp. 13, 26; Block, 1979, p. 259; *Idiom*, 1975, pp. 3 - 8; Tucker, 1977, pp. 165 - 168). Later on, they may be grateful for the theory, although sometimes this sounds like the relieved or triumphant cry from those who have survived.

How far is the method tutor responsible for the failure or success of new teachers? Not very far, if one looks at it. I will take English teachers as my example partly because that is my area of immediate concern, partly because so many teachers trained in other areas find themselves teaching English at some stage, and partly because in most states English is a compulsory study up to the end of secondary school. It is often felt that, because all teachers have experienced and passed all levels of school English, then they are, in part, qualified to teach school English. However, what I discuss applies to all method areas. In an average Diploma of Education year, English student teachers will take something like 25 hours of English method, perhaps 1½ hours a week over the nine term weeks for each of three terms, with several weeks out of this for teaching practice. The student may also take a second method (25 hours), and foundation studies, including the history, administration, psychology and sociology of education (100 hours). English method contact with tutors will make up about 25 out of a total 150 contact hours, which is 16.6% of the contact time during training. The method tutor may visit the student three times in schools, watch him teach and discuss that performance with the student and his school supervisor, which constitutes another 5 hours a year, perhaps. He will ask him to write a class paper, lesson plans, and one or more essays; there may be workshops to discuss or prepare materials;

and perhaps individual discussion of essays, which not all students experience, and workshop contact might amount to another two or three hours a year. The method tutor himself may deal with up to 80 students in a method course, and may teach other courses in connected areas, carry out research, involve himself in administration and, if he is doing his job properly, retain contact with schools in a consultant capacity. Some method tutors teach in schools part-time. The time each one has to give to his students may be fairly limited.

Added to this, the method tutor is low on the hierarchy of academics in a university or college education faculty. If he comes from a senior school position, he often feels that he is belittled by the attitudes of academics once in the tertiary institution. If he is an appointed academic, he will often seek to acquire status by carrying out research or doing some teaching in more "academic" areas, and in degree rather than diploma courses; this may in fact, be his major interest. Method is to academic studies as a garage mechanic is to a qualified engineer: the method tutor apparently has acquired some routine tricks in dealing with the practice and materials of teaching without necessarily having a knowledge of the theory.

The problem goes further, because the English method teacher may be considered closer in kind to the literature academics in the English Department in his university than to the academics of the Education Faculty. But he will be even less welcome there, since most university English departments (there are exceptions) do not accept any association with school English except at a fairly rarified level - sixth form literature, perhaps; nor do they generally seek contact with the Education Faculty, while sociologists and psychologists have more in common. University English departments are not to be blamed, because English teaching at secondary school levels relates to advanced literary criticism only to a very small degree. The numbers taking sixth form literature study for the final examination have diminished sharply in Victoria: in one leading secondary school, 15 pupils are taking literature for HSC out of nearly 250 sixth form candidates, and even in girls' schools, literature is no longer a major HSC choice.

However, whatever his status, background, interests or teaching load, the method tutor plays a very small part in the training of a secondary teacher. With the best will, or skill, in the world, his influence is only a link in a long chain of direct influences; by this I mean actual influences on how an English teacher will teach English. *Figure 1* gives some idea.

The chart indicates four major influences on the English teacher's behaviour: pupils, classroom English teachers, university or college lecturers and tutors, and a final group of a variety of "experts". Each group exerts influence at various stages of development, as follows:

#### A. Pupils:

Stage 1 - as a pupil: As a pupil in school, the average person will have sat through about 1000 hours of English lessons in secondary school alone, and will have closely observed, and judged at least six English teachers. The pupil may well have observed and tested a variety of student teachers and inexperienced teachers.

Stage 2 - as a student teacher: The student teacher's main focus in his teaching rounds is on the pupils; through their reactions he judges his success or failure. He alters his behaviour in response to their cues. They dominate his training year.

Stage 3 - as a teacher: The teacher now in a job is at once more and less at the mercy of his pupils; he is in final authority, but he also has no escape. They provide his greatest rewards and cause his anxieties. What he does is dictated in part by what his pupils permit or force him to do. Pupil expectations mould the teacher's teaching.

#### B. Teachers:

Stage 1 - as a pupil: Once again, the teachers who have taught us influence how we feel about teachers and teaching. "I will be better than the worst teacher I know" is more common than, "I hope to be as good as my best teachers".

Stage 2 - teaching practice: Classroom teachers are observed and they direct the student teacher's efforts. Watching someone in practice (the teacher in class) has more effect than listening to ideas about practice (the method tutor). Student teachers will watch the English supervising teacher or be observed by the teacher for about 100 hours, compared with about 30 hours contact with the English method tutor. During teaching practice, the student will probably be involved with two or three English teachers in as many schools.

Stage 3 - as a teacher: Teachers on the job in a school will be influenced in what they do by the policy of the school on curriculum and organisation, by the English department, the English co-ordinator and the attitudes of colleagues. Recent observations indicate that teachers alter their teaching to merge in with the school, so that differences between schools appear in some cases stronger than differences between teachers.

#### C. University or College Lecturers:

Stage 1: The future English teacher may spend up to three or four years studying literature and literary criticism. Whether he enjoys it or not, his conception of English is of high quality literature and a particular kind of written response to literature. He probably comes to school English teaching with a knowledge and love of good literature, and clearly some teachers always resent the failure of their pupils to acquire the same. In fact, the teaching of quality literature may seldom be appropriate in many English classes.

Stage 2: The student English teacher has 25 hours with the method tutor in which to learn what school English teaching means, and to acquire some knowledge of teaching English as a second language and of teaching basic reading skills, as well as language study, drama, film and all those areas which school English now covers - and to acquire skill in managing a class so that any teaching can take place at all.

Stage 3: The minority of teachers return to universities and colleges after some years of experience, to take higher diplomas and degrees.

There appears to be a more satisfactory contact between teachers and lecturers at this level than at any earlier stage, and, teachers claim, it is more profitable. Some are looking for qualifications, but many, having achieved a stage of secure competence in classroom management, say that they have reached a time when they are ready to consider influences, processes, and content at a theoretical level.

D. *Other Experts:*

1. *Consultants* — State education departments and curriculum departments provide experts, normally teachers of established excellence, to give advice, demonstrate materials and organise conferences to assist teachers and keep them up-to-date. Since the consultants know the locality and usually teach there part-time, they are often more trusted by teachers than academics, though this is not always so. On the other hand, the consultants often express a confusion about their task and an ignorance of their area, particularly the fashionable language consultants in Victoria. Many regions organise in-service seminars for first-year-out teachers, to give advice and support.
2. *Subject Associations* — English subject associations provide printed resource material and classroom advice in their journals, and some lectures and conferences. Since these are the forum for idea exchange among academics and administrators in the English teaching area, first-year-out teachers find little of immediate use. However, changes from UK and USA are spread through the English Associations, though probably more widely through imported publications. The associations often sponsor overseas visitors, which hastens the adoption of new ideas.
3. *Examining bodies* — In the old days, the Examinations Board of Victoria put out a syllabus with recommended texts covering Forms I to VI, and teachers could confidently follow that. Now the Form VI examination syllabus tends to filter down at least to Form III, and many Victorian teachers feel that they must teach summary, clear thinking, and thematic essay writing based on an accurate and detailed knowledge of the facts of a variety of literary texts, if they are to prepare pupils adequately for the compulsory English paper at sixth form.
4. *Textbook writers and publishers* — Perhaps the most obvious influence on the English teacher is the textbook. When thematic collations were produced, teachers used them. Now that publishers are producing language texts, most teachers have reverted to collections of exercises on vocabulary and sentence structure which were popular in the 1950's and early 1960's. Because such books provide actual lesson work, quick to set, absorbing to complete and easy to correct in class time, they determine the teaching of new teachers who have problems in classroom discipline, as well as being short of time and energy to prepare and correct. These tests appear to influence what and how English teachers teach more than any other agent, and the written examples are certainly a way of keeping disruptive classes in their seats.

5. *Public opinion* — The choice of these texts is also a response to public opinion as expressed by the media, employers and parents. To the layman concerned about apparently declining standards of literacy, language exercises appear to be practically useful, and even pupils think so. Research indicates that such exercises are less useful than other methods of teaching reading and writing (Thodey), but possibly they are more useful than sticking collages, excursions to the pictures, and classroom discussion that stops there. Nor do they pose the apparent moral dangers of the adolescent novels teachers might use to encourage an interest in reading; language exercises are safe. Public opinion influences what teachers think they ought to teach, especially when they are made to feel that their teaching will determine whether or not their pupils will be employable.

And with this, we come to the end of the long list of those who influence the English teacher.

I have recently spent several weeks in a variety of secondary school English departments, and observed and talked to many experienced and newly qualified English teachers. I came to the following conclusions:

(1) The policy and tone of a school determined what an individual English teacher could do in his classroom; this applied as much in state schools as in independent schools, but in a different way. In independent and Catholic schools, a curriculum policy was determined from above, but after consultation with individual teachers; apparently teachers who objected either left or adapted. Parental criticism and, equally important, support, pressured teachers to conform, as did pupil pressure. In state high schools, a less easily defined tone determined a teacher's classroom behaviour. Teachers would say "you couldn't ever get the kids to do that in this school", or "we have to make them whether they like it or not". It appeared that a certain overall pupil pressure determined classroom methods, and this was influenced by a strong feeling that parents were not supportive and by a variety of reactions to the school administration. From conversations it became quite clear that many independent high school parents are very neglectful and unsupportive and many state high school parents are dedicated to the school, but in general teachers themselves perceive a difference and relate this to pupil co-operation.

(2) New teachers use their experienced colleagues as models and resources, and in schools where English departments provided clear and even rigid guidelines, new teachers settled in more quickly. First-year-out teachers acting as emergencies were in an impossible situation, since the practising teachers had limited time to help and the pupils did not take them seriously.

(3) New teachers from university and college one year end-on training courses felt less kindly towards their teacher training -- but not their basic degree courses -- than those from one secondary teachers' college which merges academic studies and training for at least the last two years. But the college-trained teachers felt at a disadvantage in the hierarchy, and one college-trained teacher considered that he had been limited in his general experience and needed a time out. One cannot help feeling that as

other university departments normally have little respect for Education faculties, the opinions of student teachers cannot fail to be influenced. On the other hand, established teachers taking in-service courses were on the whole quite enthusiastic about university Education faculties.

(4) Overwhelmingly, what happened in any English classroom was most influenced by the available textbooks and the University entrance examination in English. No amount of persuasion, or proof of the inadequacy of such texts or syllabuses, would be likely to change this, because individual teachers seldom selected their class books: the books were set for all classes at a particular level, and as mentioned already, they served several purposes other than those directly involving the development of reading and writing skills -- purposes connected with classroom discipline, preparation and correction, and public demand for clear evidence of attention to literacy.

(5) After all this, many of the teachers of English I spoke to had little or no English training; only a few had an English major, most having one or two years University study. Many had not taken English method during the education year. A small number had no background at all in English beyond school: one had taught Latin until the school abandoned it, another was a Commerce teacher, a third Domestic Science, with the remainder qualified in History. Few had any interest in in-service courses, claiming shortage of time; few read the journals, even of the local Subject Association, or attended the conferences; they had little faith in State Education Department resources. The English method tutor, in fact, has had no opportunity to influence many of the classroom teachers of English at all.

Despite what I have said, I am not suggesting that the method tutor is of little significance in the development of the English teacher: on the contrary, he has more direct influence than any other person in the Education faculty, except in some cases where particular political ideologies make an impact. The tutor maintains contact with that other vital influence, the school supervising teacher. However, he needs to realise that the perceptions of teachers which the student teacher already has as a pupil, and the pressures which will be exerted on him once he has a job in a school, will in the end enormously influence how he teaches English. The method tutor may modify or develop, but in 30 contact hours out of a score of years of student experience he can hardly be expected to create a competent teacher. "How do you make pupils like a poem?" is rather more difficult to explain than "How do you draw up a deed?" or "How do you bannage a foot?" and the consequences of making a mess of the task are rather harder to identify; sadly, too, most people would attach a good deal less immediate importance to the first question than the second two -- and so, I suppose, would I, if it were my foot, my deed and my poem. Suffice to say that despite the dozen influences on how in the end an English teacher will teach (a poem, for instance) we still do not really know how best to train an English teacher, given the variety of teacher personalities, the groups of pupils with very different needs, and the diverse nature of our individual schools.

A solution, if we think that more efficient teaching of method is essential in modifying or adapting some of the attitudes acquired by student teachers at school, from the community, and in their undergraduate literature courses, is to increase the amount of time given to English method in the training course. I still believe that teachers do better to take undergraduate courses along with students who do not intend to teach, and that training should be carried out in a postgraduate year. Therefore the English method must be covered in one year. But it is still possible to give more time to the area.

In a recent visit to Oxford and Exeter, I was made painfully aware of the following:

- student teachers spent far more time on English method;
- method tutors had to cope with fewer students in teaching and school visiting;
- tutorial groups were smaller.

Added to these:

- a more concentrated period was spent in school practice, often a full term -- supervising teachers were not paid;
- method tutors attached great importance to close contact with the school supervisors, even counting on close friendships over the years of contact with a school.

And finally:

- language courses directly related to the classroom were available for all students, and included TESL and reading teaching.

The limitations here are mainly organisational: method has low academic status in universities and colleges, and the lack of finance prevents the recruitment of well-qualified method lecturers; and payment of supervising teachers in schools prevents any increase in the interrupted 45 days of teaching practice for the same reason. It is unlikely that any changes in either area will be possible in the present period of belt-tightening. Meanwhile, the method tutor may do what he can; he is still a vital link in the chain.

Perhaps, even with more time, student teachers will still face the same problems once they enter schools. Given the strength of the influences, it may be that the best solution could be found in in-service training. Teachers would have overcome their initial difficulties, and be in a position to reassess what they now do, and why. A policy of compulsory up-dating, with courses towards credits as in America, would ensure that all teachers do come back to study. My own experience with teachers taking in-service degrees is that they benefit enormously from demanding academic work after they have some experience of schools and children; this is the curriculum area that we might do best to develop.

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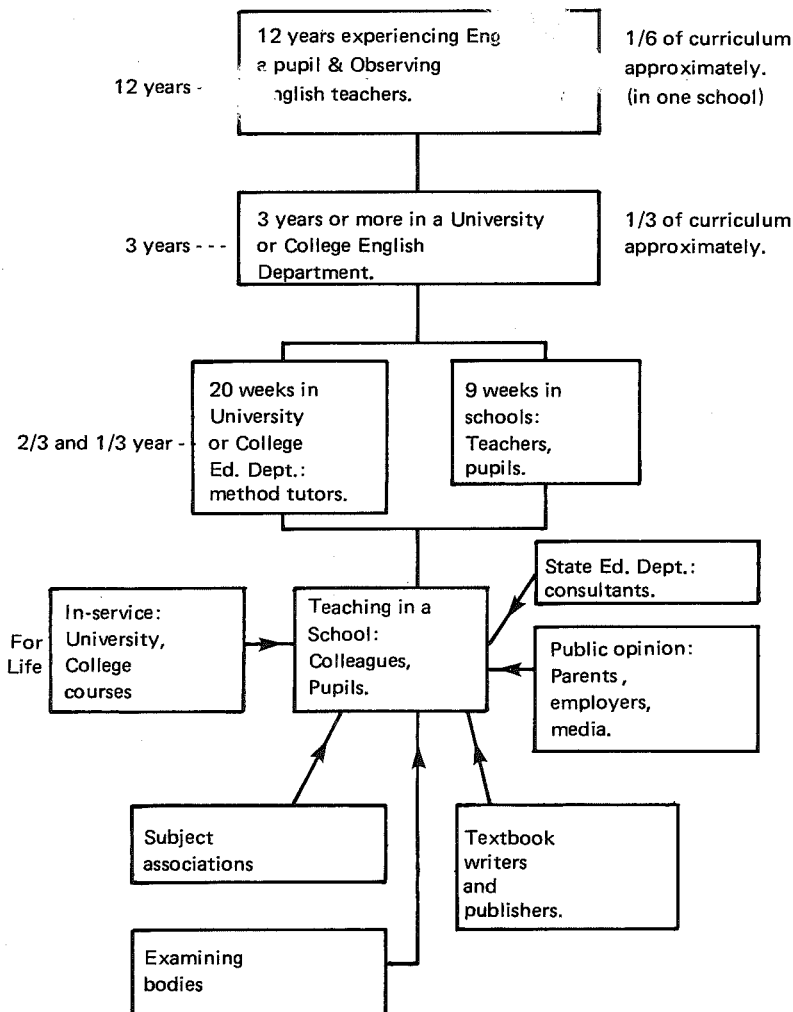
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The editors regret that the following figure was omitted in error from Vol. 5, No. 1 July, 1980, P2

FIGURE 1.

— WHO DOES THE TEACHER LEARN FROM? —



*The Teachers of the English Teacher: The Influence of the School, the Community and the Training Institution.*

D.M. Murison (La Trobe University)