

**LEONIE G HIGGS****THEORY IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND PRACTICE IN TEACHER EDUCATION****Abstract**

A problem in education, that has long concerned philosophers of education, is the problem of the relationship between theory and practice in educational research and practice. Despite the fact that much has been written on the relationship between theory and practice in education, it would seem that teachers continue to cling to an image of theory as incomprehensible “jargon” that has nothing to do with their everyday problems and concerns. This paper sets out to address this misconception by discussing the views of lecturers involved in teacher education on the place of theory in educational research and practice in teacher education.

**Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to discuss the views of lecturers involved in teacher education on the place of theory in educational research and practice in teacher education.

Theory plays an important role in determining the nature of educational research and practice in teacher education. It is, therefore, necessary to acknowledge the importance of theory in educational research and practice in teacher education, and also ascertain the influence that theory has on educational research and practice in teacher education. I would argue that theory seeks to emancipate teachers from their dependency on practices that are the product of ideological and political constructs while at the same time allowing teachers to critically reflect on their practice in the classroom. It does this by means of critical modes of enquiry that are aimed at exposing and examining the beliefs, assumptions and values implicit in ideological and political agendas which often determine how teachers organize their experiences and practices in the classroom. In the interests of best practice, it is therefore necessary for teachers to acquire the necessary theoretical astuteness, in order to interact critically with those cultural, political, social and economic concerns which impact either positively or negatively on their classroom practice.

This paper sets out to determine whether these sentiments are evidenced in the views of lecturers involved with teacher education programmes at three South African universities, namely, the University of South Africa, University of Stellenbosch and the University of the North West.

**Background**

There is a significant body of literature that discusses the role that theory plays in educational theory and practice in teacher education.

Darling-Hammond (2006: 8) notes: “One of the perennial dilemmas of teacher education is how to integrate theoretically based knowledge that has traditionally been taught in university classrooms with the experience-based knowledge that has traditionally been located in the practice of teachers and the realities of classrooms

and schools". In this context Chen et al (2010: 91) reveals that the quality of teacher education programmes can be improved only if the teacher educators help student teachers to identify the gap between teaching and theory and continually facilitate them in connecting their learnt theory and practice. Stofflert & Stoddart (1994) argue that without the necessary theoretical knowledge it is difficult challenge for teacher educators and researchers to change the training of teachers who teach in a traditional manner in order to change their educational practices. In this context Korthagen et al (2006) constructed the following theoretical framework for student teacher learning and program change in teacher education:

- Learning about teaching involves continuously conflicting and competing demands;
- Learning about teaching requires a view of knowledge as a subject to be created rather than as a created subject;
- Learning about teaching requires a shift from the curriculum to the learner;
- Learning about teaching is enhanced through (student) teacher research;
- Learning about teaching requires an emphasis on those learning to teach working closely with their peers;
- Learning about teaching requires meaningful relationships between schools, universities and student teachers;
- Learning about teaching is enhanced when the teaching and learning approaches advocated in the program are modelled by the teacher educators in their own practice.

Theory thus guides the research efforts of teacher educators and teachers in the sense that theoretical frameworks determine the problems that can be addressed by teacher educators, as well as, the adequacy of proposed solutions to these problems. In so doing, theory assists teacher educators and teachers to critically reflect on education policy issues that impact positively or negatively on best practice in the classroom. It is, therefore, important to recognise the role that theory can play in educational research and practice in teacher education. This means that teacher educators and teachers need to be aware of, and familiar with, the different theoretical frameworks that inform and shape educational theory and research in teacher education. Stated differently, it is necessary for teacher educators and teachers to recognise and be aware of the theoretical assumptions that influence the nature of educational theory and practice in teacher education in order to ascertain the impact of these assumptions on the theory and practice of teaching in the classroom. Such an awareness will instil in teacher educators and teachers a critical astuteness that will be concerned with determining the most effective, relevant and best, practice in the classroom, while at the same time ensuring that education practice is not directed by ideological and political concerns but rather by educational principles.

### **The Research Design**

In setting about the aim of this paper, namely, to discuss the views of lecturers involved in teacher education on the place of theory in educational research and practice in teacher education, open ended questions were sent out by email to lecturers involved with teacher education programmes at three South African

universities, namely, the University of South Africa, University of Stellenbosch and the University of North West. The research questions posed were:

- What place does theory have in educational research and practice?
- Do you think that theory is important in educational research and practice, and if so, why?
- How can theory contribute to educational research and practice?
- What theory do you use in your educational research and practice and why?
- Should theory be included in the curriculum for teacher education, and if so how?

These questions were sent to fourteen lecturers and responses were received from seven lecturers.

### **Research Method**

Narrative inquiry was used to interpret the findings accruing from the collected data in the form of the responses to the open ended questions that were concerned with:

- the identification of the role of theory in teacher education;
- an analysis of the theoretical assumptions that underlie the present practice of teacher education in South Africa;
- the impact that the theoretical assumptions that underlie the present practice of teacher education in South Africa have had on the teaching profession, education policy and classroom practice;
- improvements in the curriculum and teaching of theory in teacher education programmes.

### **Data Collection**

The responses received from the seven lecturers were then listed and collated as follows:

#### **1 What place does “theory” have in educational research and practice?**

- “Theory plays a major part in all research. Without theory there will be no application – because what would you apply?”.
- The role of theory in research can be to generate hypotheses or explain phenomena. This should make theory an integral part of research.
- “.....there is a strong interrelationship between theory and research. For example, research may produce results that cause the theory to be revised, or rejected”.
- “Theory..... allows a researcher to be cognisant of the most recent and authoritative theories on a topic”.
- Educational research is or should be research guided by theory. Similarly, no practice can stand outside a theoretical position, and therefore is not devoid of theory.
- “Theory plays a critical and creative role in educational research and practice”.
- “Theory already plays an important role in educational practice. Most of what is being done is already theory-based”.

**2 Do you think that theory is important in educational research and practice, and if so, why?**

- “The importance of theory in educational research and practice cannot be over emphasised”.
- “Yes, it is very important. Theory helps to explain how certain educational phenomena occur. For example, it clarifies why certain education policies come into being and how they affect all those involved”.
- “Theory is important as it provides a lens through which to understand the research envisaged and provides a framework to develop a deeper understanding of practice”.
- “...theory is used to generate conceptual models, which are often represented as graphical figures that display variables and their interrelationships”.
- “...theory provides educational research and practice with a critical framework for dealing with educational problems”.

**3 How can theory contribute to educational research and practice?**

- “Theory is the foundation and backbone of all research, theoretical or empirical”.
- “Theory can be used to explain why certain aspects of educational practice are problematic or successful”.
- “The contribution of theory is that it has a level of generality and can be used in most research projects and practice”.
- The application of theory can reduce the possibility of making incorrect instructional decisions in teacher education.
- “Theory assists researchers and teachers to critically reflect on education policy and classroom practice in attempting to ensure best education practice”.

**4 What theory do you use in your educational research and practice, and why?**

- “I often use System theory. Another theory that I often use is Constructivism, because the context of knowledge development is very important especially with research in the SA environment”.
- “I use theories which are in line with modern trends in educational research and practice such as post-modernism, African philosophy and critical theory”.
- “I use theories that are compatible with the emerging paradigm, for example Critical theory and Social Constructivism. The main reason of using these theories is that they consider knowledge as a social construct and reject the notion that human behaviour is a social construct”.
- “I use Critical Social Theory in my research and practice”.
- “I always use the most relevant conceptual framework/s for the topic under investigation”.
- “I use a pluralistic (postmodern) approach to theory because the application of theory is contextually determined”.

- “In our projects we use a variety of theories, depending on the problem that are researched”.
- 5 Should theory be included in the curriculum for teacher education, and if so, how?**
- “I feel strongly about the inclusion of theory in the curriculum”.
  - “Prospective teachers have to be aware of the different theories and how they can assist them to understand or question some of the decisions made about their practice”.
  - “Yes. Theory must be situated in the context of the novice teachers own teaching”.
  - “Theory should be included in a way that provides a theoretical basis to think about the classroom, and to relate classroom experiences to known theory”.
  - “Definitely. Students should be exposed to different theories, such as learning theories”.
  - Yes. Theory should be included in the curriculum for teacher education. Prospective teachers have to be aware of the different theories and how they can assist them to understand or question some of the decisions made about their practice.
  - “Theory should be included in the curriculum for teacher education. At undergraduate level and post graduate level”.

### **Summation of Responses**

The responses of the seven lecturers to the open ended questions revealed the following:

**1 What place does theory have in educational research and practice?**

The lecturers revealed significant agreement in their responses to the place of theory in educational research and practice. It is clear from the responses that theory plays a critical and creative role in educational research and practice. All the lecturers agreed that there is a strong relationship between theory and practice.

**2 Do you think that theory is important in educational research and practice, and if so, why?**

All the lecturers agreed that theory in educational research and practice cannot be overemphasised and yes, theory in educational research and practice is very important. Reasons provided to substantiate this claim are:

- theory helps to explain how certain educational phenomena occur, it clarifies why and how education policies come into being;
- theory provides a lens through which to understand the research envisaged and provides a framework to develop a deeper understanding of practice;
- theory provides education research and practice with a critical framework for dealing with education problems.

**3 How can theory contribute to educational research and practice?**

Theory can be used to explain why certain aspects of education practice are problematic or successful. Theory helps us to question the decisions made about

education by those in authority. The best theory for research and practice should have significance and should be able to make a difference to how we view the world. The application of theory can reduce the possibility of making incorrect instructional decisions in teacher education. Theory assists researchers and teachers to critically reflect on education policy and classroom practice in attempting to ensure best education practice. Theory assists researchers with a clearer understanding of a research problem.

#### **4 What theory do you use in your educational research and practice and why?**

It is interesting to note that the respondents all use different theories in their educational research and practice, for example: some lecturers use Post Modernism, African Philosophy and Critical Theory; other lecturers use Social Constructivism. All the lecturers, however, agreed that the educational problem and the research question that they are concerned with determines the theory they select to assist them to solve that particular problem.

#### **5 Should theory be included in the curriculum for teacher education, and if so how?**

All respondents agreed that theory should be included in the curriculum for teacher education. They argued that students should be aware of the different theories used in education research and practice and how these theories can assist them to understand or question decisions made about best practice in the classroom. Theory can also assist them to think critically about their own classroom practice. As far as the curriculum is concerned, at undergraduate level, theory should be introduced at a general level which exposes students to various theoretical frameworks that can be used in critically reflecting on education policy and practice. At postgraduate level, students should be encouraged to identify, master and critically reflect on a theory that they will use in researching an educational problem in their postgraduate studies.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to discuss the views of lecturers involved in teacher education on the place of theory in educational research and practice in teacher education. From the responses received to the open ended questions sent out to teacher educators it became evident that these lecturers believed that theory was important in educational research and practice in teacher education and that theory should be included in the curriculum for teacher education so that teachers may acquire a critical disposition in addressing problems that they encounter in education policy and the classroom.

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