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Crossing the "Theory-practice Divide": Learning to Be(come) a Teacher

Abstract

A common view of theory and practice as domains is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to traverse the epistemological chasm between them. After all, theories are ways of organising our world abstractly in ideas and concepts. Practice is the world that we inhabit empirically. It is a tangible world that we can see, feel, act on, act in, and so on. So, how can one even begin to argue that these apparently disparate worlds can be unified or that they are in the first instance not separate at all? My stance on this is that we, the educators of teachers, are party to the separation. In fact, we teach students that they should 'apply' theory to practice. Working with our own struggle at the university where I am based, I will argue that there may be ways of opening the borders between what is, on the one hand a philosophical question, and on the other, a purely empirical question. How do we teach and how do we teach the doing of teaching? My argument explores one way we might begin to restore; to whatever extent this is possible, the unity of theory and practice in teacher education.

Keywords: teacher education, teaching schools, the theory-practice divide, learning-to-become a teacher

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Introduction

A topic such as the one I have chosen is somewhat circumspect, I have to admit. Theories are ways of organising our world abstractly in terms of ideas and concepts. Practice is the observable world, a tangible world that we can see, feel, act on, act in and so on. So, how can one even begin to argue that these apparently disparate worlds can be unified?

I share with you some of the experiences and challenges that I have experienced with colleagues and other role players in the establishment of a school that is directly linked to a university, "a teaching school." It is in the very establishment of the school, with its challenges that surface and resurface, that the notion dawned on us that we, as teacher educators, may be the guilty party affecting the divide. We may be contributing to the rending of what is, I argue, ontologically a unity, or what should be a unity. I use the term in line with Heidegger's (1962) argument that ontology addresses the question: "What is the meaning of being?" As I see it the epistemological divide is caused by the need for knowledge to categorise and compartmentalise the world into manageable units of analysis. The theory-practice divide permeating discussion of pre-service education rends what is ontologically a unity that exists as such before knowing commences to reduce this unity to knowable parts.

My argument explores one way we might begin to restore, to whatever extent this is possible, the unity of theory and practice in teacher education.

Expectations of teacher education

In my interaction with schools and other role-players in education I am often confronted with strong views about the quality of teacher education in South Africa. The recent strong lobby in the media to (re-)open teacher colleges, and arguments made at the Teacher Development Summit in 2009, testifies to the implicit mistrust in the university education of teachers. Many delegates at this summit voiced the opinion that universities do not prepare teachers adequately for the schooling system, due to the 'academic bias' of their teacher education programmes. A similar view is reflected in an article published in the Mail & Guardian, with the headline 'Why we need colleges of education' (Rice, 2010). Rice makes the case that foundation phase teachers should not be educated at universities, where the focus is on 'abstract theory,' because foundation phase teachers should acquire skills rooted in 'pragmatic practice.'

The sentiment that universities do not prepare teachers adequately for the realities of classroom practice is not uniquely South African. Smagorinsky and his co-authors say university teacher educators are often viewed as "aloof within the ivory tower, espousing ideals and the principles that govern them" (Smagorinsky et al, 2003, p. 1400). In contrast "school-based teachers engage in practice in the teeming world of the classroom" (ibid.).

Many of the criticisms that I have been encountering are of course generalizations, based, for example, on a school principal's experience of student-teachers who do not cope during school experience, or novice teachers who struggle to deal with the

demands of the teaching profession (by personal communication): "The students coming from universities nowadays don't have a clue ... what do you teach them at the university?"

In responding, I often argue that the expectation that universities should deliver a "fully prepared" teacher is unrealistic (Gravett et al, 2011). Our task is to deliver competent beginning teachers, that is, teachers with a starting and growth competence (Hoy and Woolfolk, 1989) who have the ability to continue to develop once they enter the teaching profession. I argue that no teacher education programme can prepare teachers for the full complexity of real classrooms, where they take full responsibility for the first time.

Feiman-Nemser (2001, p. 1026) makes this point concisely:

> "New teachers have two jobs – they have to teach and they have to learn to teach. No matter how good a preservice program may be, there are some things that can only be learned on the job. The preservice experience lays a foundation and offers practice in teaching. The first encounter with real teaching occurs when beginning teachers step into their own classroom. Then learning to teach begins in earnest."

However, it would be arrogant of us not to pay attention to the criticism of our teacher education programmes and not to engage in serious introspection. What are the reasons for the perception that we are not doing well in terms of teacher education? Are we indeed delivering competent beginning teachers? Why do recently qualified teachers say teacher education programmes are too theoretical and that we do not prepare them well for the harsh social reality of the classroom? Here I refer to findings in recent research on novice teachers entering the teaching profession (Gravett et al, 2011). How can these critiques inform our thinking about our teacher education programmes?

I will address some of these questions in this paper. I will first discuss the perceived theory-practice divide as a dilemma that seems to plague teacher education. Then I will argue that Jerome Bruner's notion of "learning to be" may provide a solution to the tangled issues of teacher education. I will also say something briefly about a phronesis-oriented approach to teacher education as one way of seeing teacher preparation, discerning different knowledge forms as already distinguished by the ancient Greeks. Lastly, I will refer to the *Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa,* specifically Activity 4.5, which reads: "Strengthening the teaching practice/school experience component of teacher education programmes through the development of Teaching Schools." Here I will tell you how we at the University of Johannesburg are grappling with implementing a programme that has been designed to incorporate a teaching school that is integral to the programme.

The perceived theory-practice divide in teacher education

I go then, first, to the much maligned "theory-practice divide." It is a dominant theme in the teacher education literature. Educationists discuss the reasons for the divide and advice on how to bridge it abounds.

I agree with authors, such as Korthagen et al, (2001), McIntyre (1995) and Vander Ven (2001) who doubt the validity of this position. I too question the perceived theory-practice binary in teacher education. I argue that the way in which we think about teacher education and the way in which programmes are planned and implemented may actually be creating the binary. We have a discourse of 'studying theory from books and in lectures' and then 'applying' it practically in what is termed the 'real world.'

It is expedient to suggest that teacher education institutions appear to deal with the interplay between theory and practice mainly in two ways. Some follow a "translation-of-theory-to-practice" approach, implying that the coursework component of programmes supplies the theory that the students then apply, implement and "test," e.g. through assignments, observations and experiences in schools as sites of practicum.

An analysis of teacher education in various countries shows that this conventional view of teacher education prevails despite the evidence suggesting that this approach has a very limited success (Korthagen, 2011; Tigchelaar & Korthagen, 2004). Some of the "new" approaches often take the form of creative procedures and tasks to try and interest student-teachers in particular theories and linking these to their teaching practice. (I would add that these theories are often lecturers' "pet theories" or theories emanating from their research interests.) This means that the point of departure in such programmes remains a theory-to-practice-flow.

Other teacher education institutions respond to the criticism of being overly-theoretical by increasing practicum at schools. Here the belief is that the exposure to classroom practice will result in improved preparation for the practice of schooling. This could indeed be the case if students are placed with expert teachers who are willing and able to mentor students. But, as Darling-Hammond (2001) argues, students need to learn from good practicing teachers whose practice will serves as good examples to be emulated in their own practice.

Finding enough of these expert teachers in the current South African educational landscape proves to be a challenge. Also, as Feiman-Nemser (2001, p 1020) reminds us "cooperating teachers often feel the need to protect student teachers from 'impractical' ideas promoted by education professors who are out of touch with classroom realities."

Nevertheless, I would argue that both these approaches may actually be creating a chasm between what is referred to as theory ("formal knowledge", knowledge about ideas, declarative knowledge or what the Greeks referred to as *episteme*) and practice (practical knowledge, knowledge of how to do the work of teaching, or procedural

knowledge) by using either a theory-to-practice articulation or by foregrounding experience in schools. Implicit in both is the distinct separation of theory and practice.

"Learning to be": the ontological becoming of a beginning teacher

So how then could teacher education be conceptualised and designed to try to avoid this divide? Should we see teacher education as a continuum, with theory and practice occupying epistemological frontiers, or shall we consider them as two sides of the same coin? I prefer the latter. And I find some solace in Jerome Bruner's (as cited in Brown & Duguid, 2000) distinction between "learning about" and "learning to be." This has become a useful heuristic for me in thinking about the type of student-teacher development and learning that is required in teacher education.

Arguably, much of what is taught at universities are facts, concepts, principles and conceptual frameworks about phenomena – thus, much of university learning is "learning about." With his "learning to be" notion Bruner stresses that learning should also be understood in relation to the development of a social identity. "Learning to be" is about developing the disposition, demeanour and outlook ("the eye") of a competent practitioner. I argue that we should indeed teach students conceptual knowledge of the field of education, knowledge that they can 'declare.' However, if we want to avoid a theory-practice disjuncture, "learning to be" should be foregrounded, while "learning about" should be embedded in "learning to be." But how does one do that in the practice of teacher education?

My interpretation of Bruner's "learning to be" resonates with Kessels & Korthagen's (2001) argument. They say that a phronesis, or practical wisdom approach to teacher education resolves the theory-practice binary. They do not argue that either episteme, or for that matter techne (in the terminology of ancient Greek philosophy) should disappear from the scenario. In fact, they argue for integration. A phronesis approach focuses mainly on the development of practical reasoning or perception-based knowledge. The focus is on "deliberation that translates into action, which will be of practical benefit to those concerned" (Spence, 2007). Kessels & Korthagen (2001, p. 27) explain that, "To choose and justify a particular course of action … the ultimate appeal of phronesis is not to principles, rules, theorems, or any conceptual knowledge. Ultimately, the appeal is to perception." Choosing a form of behaviour appropriate for a particular situation requires above all that one must be able to perceive and discern the relevant details. We always act in, and react to, situations as we see and experience them. Therefore effective actions require effective ways of seeing.

One must have an eye for the moment. Becoming someone with a disposition of good pedagogical 'sight' is not learned in abstraction but learned in practice, through experience. For particulars only become familiar with experience, with a long process of "perceiving and observing, assessing situations, judging, choosing courses of action, and being confronted with their consequences" (Kessels & Korthagen, 2001, p. 27). The dilemma is of course, that experience is precisely what student-teachers

lack. But, the important point that Kessels & Korthagen (2001, p. 27) are making is that perception-based knowledge "cannot possibly be transferred to students (or induced, provoked, or elicited) through the use of purely conceptual knowledge."

So, the question Eisner (2002, p. 382) asks is: "If phronesis cannot be taught explicitly, how is it secured?" Or to rephrase: If "learning to be(come) a teacher cannot be taught explicitly, how is it secured?"

To me a "learning to be" orientation to teacher education, drawing on the phronesis approach, does not imply less conceptual knowledge (it may require even more), nor does it mean more practical work. This would be missing the point of phronesis. As Dewey (1938, p. 25) reminds us: "the belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative." Also, as Henning and Gravett (2011, p. 24) argue: "It does not follow causally that if certain theoretical principles are studied, they will find an interface with practice or, inversely, if practice is experienced, that suitable theorising will be concomitant."

My interpretation of a "learning to be" orientation draws primarily on the thinking of Bruner, (1990, 1996); Marton & Trigwell, (2000); Wubbels, Korthagen and Brekelmans (1997); Kessels & Korthagen (2001) Korthagen (2011); McIntyre (1995) and Eisner (2002). In essence, this orientation implies that student-teachers mainly engage in a form of experiential learning emanating from "student concerns." This does not imply that teacher-educators simply follow concerns or issues expressed by student-teachers. Student-teachers, particularly during their early years of study, are not in a position to identify concerns if they do not have theoretical lenses or at least declarative knowledge with which to note concerns. If you do not know you cannot see.

Teacher-educators should generate the concerns by creating suitable concrete experiences for students. This can be done in coursework through using, for example, authentic classroom materials, videotapes of teaching and learning, cases and by invoking students' own experiences as children and learners in schools. Concerns could also be created through pre-structured observation schedules in schools. The experiences that give rise to concerns are akin to what the policy on the minimum requirements for teacher education (DHET, 2011) refers to as "learning from practice." The concrete experiences and concerns can then serve as the basis for what is known as guided reflection.

In this way the reflection process can serve to make student preconceptions explicit and it affords students' the opportunity to articulate their tacit personal, practical theories. The explicating of student-teachers' tacit knowledge is crucial, because as Feiman-Nemser explains: "The images and beliefs that prospective teachers bring to their preservice preparation serve as filters for making sense of the knowledge and experiences they encounter. They may also function as barriers to change by limiting the ideas that teacher education students are able and willing to entertain" (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p 1016).

The guided reflection process also serves to structure the experience through, for example, clarification, classification, extracting core ideas and principles inherent to the experience and making tentative generalizations through extrapolation.

Once student-teachers start to become aware of the essence(s) of the situation or experience they are reflecting on, once they start to articulate their own personal practical theories related to the experience, the teacher educator guides the students to focus on some pertinent aspects of the experience. These are then examined in greater detail, and the teacher-educator simultaneously introduces applicable theoretical notions into the conversation. Next "formal" conceptual knowledge is foregrounded, for example, in the form of a lecture and applicable texts in order to further challenge, adapt, extend and deepen students' personal theories. These could, then, feed into further observation and the practicalising or practising of insights with a view to developing deliberative and deliberate practice.

In other words, what I am advocating is that theory is learned in action, not applied or transferred from another space. Personal theorising forms the basis for moving to "formal" conceptual knowledge. In essence, the approach involves "practical theorising" in the parlance of McIntyre (1995). Intuitive personal theories are gradually converted and strengthened with new epistemic knowledge and some good understanding of the techne of pedagogy.

McIntyre makes the point that, "Theorising should indeed be practical. The focus must be on what will help student teachers themselves to think critically and productively about how to teach and, more generally, about how to engage in the practice of schooling. … 'Theory' which is not clearly directed to such practical ends is indeed a burden for student teachers, a burden which most of them cast aside as soon as possible. But theory-based ideas used to guide practice and to theorise about good practice, justify themselves through the benefits which they bring" (1995, p. 377-378).

The UJ teaching school

The term "teaching school" was not used when the school was initially conceptualised (in 2008-2009) and when it was founded in 2010. However, since the establishment of the school, the "Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa" has been promulgated (2011). In Activity 4.5 the Framework makes provisioning for the establishment of teaching schools. Teaching-schools (TSs) are described as teaching laboratories, where students can engage in learning-from-practice. TSs may also be used as centres for research into teaching and learning. Furthermore, staff at TSs should be developed as mentors for student-teachers and should be able to teach methodology courses.

The vision

The School was founded in 2010 as a public school, partnered by the UJ and the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) through a Memorandum of Agreement (MoA). The objectives for establishing the school were to:

- Serve the education needs of young children in close proximity to the UJ Soweto campus (SWC).

- Develop a clinical/practicum site for the education of teachers of young children, with school teachers taking on the role of teacher educators, working in tandem with UJ academic staff, and students moving seamlessly between coursework and practicum.

- Enable longitudinal child development studies and research on children's performance in the school curriculum.

We envisaged that the school would serve as a site that would enable a "learning to be" orientation to teacher education. We envisaged that students would observe (perceive) and assess situations in the school, reflect on them and connect them to relevant theoretical notions presented in coursework. We envisaged the interweaving of practical (experiential) knowledge with knowledge of ideas (theory). We hoped that the concrete experience in the school would allow opportunities during coursework to systematically study, analyze and theorize practice.

We have been trying to do this by coordinating coursework and practical experiences in the school. First year BEd students study a curriculum that is geared for grade R children and their practicum takes place in the grade R classes, while in their second year they focus on grade 1 learners. In their third year they study the learning and the development of grade 3 and 4 children. In their fourth year they integrate all the various dimensions of their studies and they spend the bulk of their school experience in other schools. The school, when it continues later on as a comprehensive primary school, will also be the place where Intermediate Phase BEd students will go to learn from and in practice.
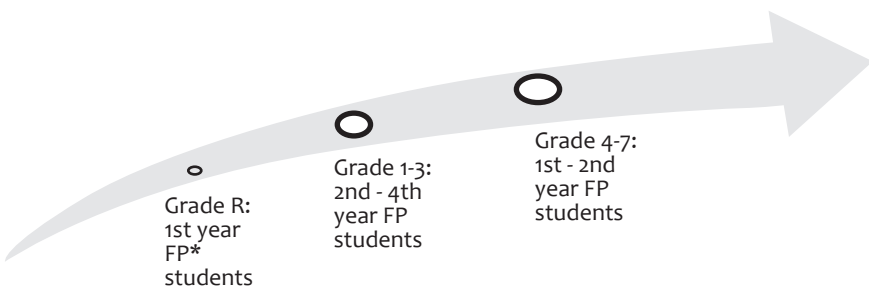

Grade R:
1st year
FP*
students

Grade 1-3:
2nd - 4th
year FP
students

Grade 4-7:
1st - 2nd
year FP
students

Figure 1: The Foundation Phase and the Intermediate phase curriculum in concord with learner cohorts in the school

Students are involved in three ways at the school on a continuous basis: they do structured observations, they work as classroom assistants and they take up limited teaching responsibilities.

The challenges to the vision

The School as GDE-school

Despite a memorandum of agreement (MoA) with the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE), and support from the GDE, UJ has encountered several obstacles in pursuing the vision. In terms of current education legislation the school is a public school with no special status. Navigating the relationship with the school is a challenge. How much can we "interfere" in the school? What do we do when students report to us objectionable practices in the school? What do we do when we encounter practices that emanate from GDE policies, rules and training that we find questionable or even educationally unsound, bearing in mind that the teachers and school will be assessed on their implementation of these?

The teachers and their contribution to the development of our students

Teachers in a teaching school have to fulfil multiple roles. In addition to their teaching role, they also have to take up the role of school-based teacher educator, dealing not only with the complexity of working with and managing groups of students, but also collaborating with the university-based teacher educators. Ideally, such teachers should be purposefully selected to ensure that they have the potential to fulfil these multiple roles. However, as a public school, the teachers are appointed by the School Governing Body (SGB) and they do not necessarily have the profile that fits the requirements. Not only do these teachers require a more specialised knowledge of their subjects and of teaching methods, but also of how to mentor students.

Feiman-Nemser & Buchman (1985, p. 64) rightly make the point that, "If classrooms are to become settings for learning to teach that go beyond adaptation and unreflective imitation, purposes of learning to teach cannot automatically be subordinated to the goal of pupil learning. Teachers also must see themselves as teacher educators willing to plan for the learning of a novice." They also argue that becoming a teacher educator implies that the teacher must shift into another role. A teacher's experience as teacher alone is not sufficient. Teachers must be prepared for their roles as teacher educators.

This creates a dilemma. Although members of the Department of Childhood Education at UJ have been involved in doing staff development with the teachers, it is not feasible to expect the teacher-educators to offer the type of comprehensive and coherent programme that the teachers need to enable them to serve as role models for students and to fulfil their teacher educator mandate.

An additional dilemma is that currently, teachers, though hard-working and committed, are generally not modelling *exemplary* childhood education practices to student-teachers. One could argue that discrepancies between what is taught in coursework and what students experience at school could serve to create powerful learning experiences, because it allows for exploration of experiences. However, this presupposes that the teacher-educators are familiar with specific practices in

the school and that they themselves would spend time in the school regularly. How realistic is such an expectation? Also, my fear is that we may in fact be reinforcing a model of teaching that we do not want our students to necessarily emulate. As Darling-Hammond (2001) reminds us: "It is not true that you can learn how to practice by being told not to do what you've seen people doing."

The coursework – planning and structuring suitable tasks for students

The interweaving of practical (experiential) knowledge situated in the school with knowledge of ideas (theory) in the coursework requires careful planning and familiarity with the curriculum followed in the school. It also necessitates close collaboration between school staff and university staff. These pre-requisites present challenges that are not insurmountable, but they still place an additional burden on staff at the school and university.

We have also learned that student observations need to be planned and structured carefully beforehand and that students need to be prepared well for observation. The observations must not be an add-on, but integral to the coursework as the basis for guided reflection. If not, the observations have very little educational value.

Assessing the value and the way forward

Teacher-educators and students concur that the students' involvement in the school does indeed play a significant role in guiding student-teachers towards be(coming) teachers.

Discrepancies between coursework and student experience in the school

Despite the misgivings I expressed earlier, teacher-educators report that discrepancies between coursework ideas and student experiences in the school do indeed create valuable learning opportunities if these are used to explore student perceptions and to bring in additional theoretical notions as "lenses" to explore the discrepancies. Students also often challenge the coursework ideas, based on classroom observations, which serve to deepen understanding of the complexity of working with children.

Developing a pedagogical stance rooted in knowledge of child development

Perhaps the greatest value currently is that the way in which the programme is structured enables the possibility that students will develop "a pedagogical stance rooted in knowledge of child development" (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1018).

One of the teacher educators, Lara Ragpot (2011) offers a module on cognitive development of children in the early years. She found in her doctoral research that this very challenging theoretical work was made accessible through constant interaction with the same children over 18 months. The students did not learn that much from the teachers, but learned from observing and studying the children. They were able to bring their concerns about child learning and conceptual development to the university course in a refreshing and successful way.

A question to consider is whether we should not bolster this potential strength and focus students' observation in other courses (modules), that is, more on the children and their learning and less on what the teachers do (or not do)? This would enable student-teachers to be(come) steeped in a "developmental perspective" – a deep understanding of child development, which Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden (2005) view as critical teacher knowledge.

Developing the "tools" for continuous development

Earlier in the paper I mentioned that teacher education should deliver beginning teachers with "growth competence." In similar vein Feiman-Menser (2001, p 45) contends that student-teachers should develop "habits and skills necessary for the ongoing study of teaching in the company of colleagues." She argues that the study of teaching requires skills of observation, interpretation and analysis and she poses the question how well teacher education programmes address these habits and skills. I would claim that our students are learning these habits and skills through their involvement in the school, though we are probably not yet intentionally capitalizing on this as a strength.

Research involvement

The students also participate in research and so learn to test children individually. In a longitudinal research project we study the children, specifically in mathematics, science and language. Students learn to conduct and score the tests (some standardised). They are trained to conduct individual diagnostic interview tests and learn some of the statistics to analyse the data. They work with individual children and are likely to leave the university with skills and understanding that few novice teachers have about evaluation and assessment.

Developing a teacher education model

The three years of implementing the programme has been a steep learning curve. The incorporating of a teaching school challenged our preconceptions about teacher education. We are "learning to be(come)" teacher educators who are responsive to the concerns of our students and who would be able to optimize the teaching and learning opportunities that the teaching school afford us. We have also realised the necessity for continuous reflection on and practical theorising of our developing teacher education model.

Students and teacher-educators concur that the school is indeed adding value to the students' learning experiences. Both groups and the teachers at the school also concur that much needs to be done to ensure the realization of our vision.

Conclusion

In this paper I argued that a "learning to be" orientation could go a long way to addressing the perceived theory-practice dilemma in teacher education. I also

reflected on how we have been grappling with integrating a "teaching school" in our BEd foundation phase programme.

It would be a fallacy to assume that the integrating of a teaching school as such will necessarily address the theory-practice integration dilemma or strengthen teacher education. Also, integrating a teaching school into a teacher education programme implies that the teacher education goes on simultaneously in two distinct settings. I concur with Feiman-Nemser & Buchman (1985, p. 63) that it is a "fallacious assumption that making connections between these two worlds is straightforward."

Does the teaching school notion as envisaged in the "Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa" have the potential to enhance teacher education and to "strengthen the Work Integrated Learning (WIL) component of teacher education programmes" (DHET, p. 3)? Based on our experience, my answer is an unequivocal yes, as the experience in Finland with training schools also shows.

However, there are numerous dilemmas and challenges that will have to be addressed. These include:

• appropriate governance and management (including relationships, roles and responsibilities) models for such schools

• stumbling blocks/gaps in the current education legislative and regulatory framework that would inhibit the establishment and effective functioning of TSs and

• and resourcing of such schools.

The Faculty of Education is currently conducting research, commissioned by the Department of Higher Education and Training, on these and other aspects related to the establishing of teaching schools in South Africa. The findings will be disseminated early in 2014.

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