Reframing Quality and Impact: The Place of Theory in Education Research

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AARE President's Address 2007

Abstract

In March 2004, Stephen Ball and others presented a symposium at the conference of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) on the necessity of theory in educational research. Like Ball, I have observed that theory, not just social theory, is a difficult space and one that divides researchers (those comfortable with theory and those less so), within educational research. It is an aspect of educational research training that rarely receives the attention essential for 'quality' educational research. In the context of the contemporary research assessment exercises, it is worth reflecting on the relationship between research informed by social theory and expectations of quality and impact. In this paper I revisit the argument made by Ball and others for the necessity of theory, and discuss its role in framing research questions, informing analysis, and promoting reflexivity on the significance and relevance of research. I illustrate this process by discussing the ways theory can assist in the generation of research agendas and questions. I conclude the paper with an example of how a team of educational researchers from Australia, UK and New Zealand have made use of social theory to inform an Australian Research Council (ARC) funded project investigating the recontextualisation of health knowledge in schools.

Preamble

The various research assessment exercises in UK, New Zealand and now Australia have motivated discussions around the nature of 'quality' and the purpose of educational research. To a certain extent this is also a discussion about theory, although the word is unlikely to be mentioned, in that terms such as 'value free', 'neutral', 'critical', 'practical', 'transformational', 'evidence-based' all invoke particular ontological and/or epistemological positions, that are and can be contested. One of the questions educational researchers face in the context of such exercises, though

again implicit, is what value is attributed to robust theoretically informed research and which theoretical positions will have value? This becomes particularly pertinent in questions of the usefulness of research, or, in the Australian Research Quality Framework (RQF) as proposed by the former Liberal Coalition government, the 'impact' of research[1].

On one hand, discussions about educational research are always discussions about theory, where epistemological and ontological positions are sometimes made explicit and sometimes not. As Kinchenloe and Berry (cited in Sikes, 2006) point out, we cannot do research without theory; theory shapes how we identify a research problem and then how we frame the research that will address it, whether the research is action research, self-study, an evaluation or an intervention, an ethnography or narrative inquiry, or a poststructuralist genealogy.

I will argue in this paper that the quality of educational research rests in large part in its capacity to engage theory, to recognise the situatedness of the research in a contested field of knowledge, and to be able to speak to the work of theory in relation to the analysis and explanation of data. My own position is certainly not value free and the direction of this paper and the language and terminology I use clearly reflects my preference for particular theoretical positions. However, my purpose is not to provide a definitive position on the place or value of particular theories in educational research, but to provoke discussion about an issue which, from my point of view, is erased from many commentaries on the 'good' of educational research and 'good' educational research. Rather, I am interested in arguing that there is a need to recognise the assumptions that underpin research decisions, that there are other points of view in relation to particular concepts, and that theor(ies) and conceptual frameworks have a history – that is, they are contingent on particular times and perceived problems.

One of the problems with talking about theory is that there is a considerable lack of clarity around the meaning of the term and about what 'level' of theory is relevant for particular research problems and projects. Punch (2000), for example, differentiates between metatheories and substantive theories, Schram (2006) talks about big T and little t theory, others (including myself in this paper) use theory when it is clear they mean 'social theory' or even more particularly 'critical social theory' (e.g. Ball 2006a; b).

Dividing practices

One of my main motivations for taking the place of theory in educational research as the topic for the Presidential address was a concern that has been percolating for some time, but which has in the last year been focused by a number of events, not

only, but certainly including the RQF, together with the difficulties encountered with my own research investigating the idea of an 'obesity epidemic' and its impact on schools and young people. The more perennial concern has been that generated through my work as supervisor and mentor to research students and early career researchers.

Over the last five years I have been responsible for a subject called 'research proposal' that was designed to assist students to move from early ideas to a draft proposal for presentation and approval. From the students' point of view the most difficult and frightening component of this subject is the 'conceptual/theoretical framework', as they struggle with the very idea of theory and the place of it in their work. In a similar example, Sikes (2006) writes about how when she told her students she was writing a discussion paper on the necessity of theory, they were divided into two groups: those who found it scary and frightening and approached the idea with fear and loathing, and those (a smaller group) who said that theory excited them. Sikes goes on to ask "what is it about education and educational research that gives rise to this avoidance of, timidity regarding, theory?" (p. 44).

This divide seems to be repeated amongst academics. Amongst staff at my own institution there is something of a marker between those who 'do theory', mostly social and cultural theory and those who see themselves as more down to earth, their work more connected to practice. This division seems repeated in many of the papers on theory or introductions to theory sections in research methods texts, or discussions of the theory/practice relationship; that is, the reluctance of educational researchers to engage with theory or more properly the polarisation between those who do and those who [say] they don't. The contrast is constructed in terms of those who belong to what Schön describes as the 'swamps of practice', the people who get their hands dirty, and those in the rarified atmosphere of the ivory tower (Sikes, 2006). Such a division creates hierarchies and snobberies.

The dividing practices associated with the theory/practice binary is a material divide (different campuses, different buildings, different streams in education programs and so on), and well as a rhetorical divide in education. Theory seem to be thought of as something esoteric, separate from practice, often thought of as 'critical' in a negative way. The concept of praxis was developed to bridge this divide (Yates, 1990), but seems not to have a great deal of effect – perhaps because both sides of the divide have an investment in maintaining their differences. Clearly this is not simply a theory divide but a divide often based on historical, institutional and political decisions and policies; theory becomes one of the points around which such differences are maintained.

As I prepared this paper, the more I read the more I had sympathy with the research students and academics struggling with theory. Once we have found theories/theorists that we like, many of us tend to read and work within those boundaries – it is hard enough dealing with the debates within certain bodies of theory without looking elsewhere. So we tend to be very familiar with the theories that we use frequently and, for me, these are social theories within a particular range of theory (critical sociology, poststructuralist and feminist) – and with forms of research (qualitative in most of its versions). However, the more I read about 'theory' per se for this paper, the more I realised the little I knew. I make no apology for not encompassing all possible theories. Clearly, if I had written this paper from neo-realist or a critical realist position the paper would be somewhat different, particularly towards the end. As it is I declare that I am very much influenced by what could be called critical social theory or poststructuralist theory and this shapes the way I have approached this topic.

Changing practices: (new) theories for (new) times

> The question is not how the [learning] theories evolved but why certain theories found favour and a receptive audience at different moments in history. (Renshaw, 2002, p.7)

What counts as theory in educational research has changed over time, or rather which ideas about theory, and which theories have precedence, have changed over time within and between fields in educational research. This is usually in relation to other debates around theory, other theories that have preeminence in disciplinary fields beyond education, and the kinds of research problems that have salience at particular moments. Which theories prevail impacts on how research gets conducted and what counts as 'good' educational research. There are always debates between strongly held positions, as within any discourse. How any theory gets taken up and by whom depends on the power of particular social, political and cultural positions, and what identified needs have currency.

In attempting to map something of, what has turned out not surprisingly to be, the complex shifting patterns of theory in educational research, I searched for particular references to discussion of theory in education and found many, but two that were particularly useful: the first was a paper by Patrick Suppes written in 1974 that turned up in a Google search using the phrase 'the place of theory in educational research' (Suppes, 1974); and the second was a collection of four papers in *Discourse* from a symposium titled 'Educational research and the necessity of theory' at BERA in 2004, chaired by Stephen Ball (2006a). All of these papers speak to educational researchers about the necessity of theory in 'good' educational research, but what they mean by 'theory' and the work they see theory doing, could not be more different. The Suppes'

paper is the presidential address by Patrick Suppes to the American Educational Research Association (AERA) in 1974 published in the *American Researcher*. In this address, Suppes argues for the role of educational research in developing theory from sound scientifically informed empirical studies. As a mathematician it is not surprising that for Suppes the most useful resource for achieving this is statistics, "the bible of much if not most educational research is a statistical bible", and the "best-developed theory used in educational research is the theory of the statistical design of experiments" (p. 6).

Suppes points to five major areas in which there are good examples of theory in educational research and these are themselves telling. They are statistics, test theory, learning theory, theories of instruction and economic models. For Suppes, what theory should be doing in educational research is 'to seek [the] mechanisms or processes that answer the question of why a given aspect of education works the way it does' (p. 5). Such theory then provides guidance for policy and practice; it (and this is my interpretation) should short circuit the need for reflection ('natural intuition') or action without evidence. As he says:

> It is often thought and said that what we most need in education is wisdom and broad understanding of the issues that confront us. Not at all, I say. What we need are deeply structured theories in education that drastically reduce if not eliminate the need for wisdom. (p. 9)

Suppes refers to those other researchers of his time, such as Dewey, John Holt and Charles Silberman, who were studying practice by spending long hours observing classrooms and developing theory using methods of problem-solving, as 'romantics', as 'intellectually weak' and suffering from 'the absence of the felt need for theoretically based techniques of analysis'. For example, he writes:

> The newest version of the naïve problem-solving viewpoint is to be found in the romantics running from John Holt to Charles Silberman, who seem to think that simply by using our natural intuition and by observing what goes on in classrooms we can put together all the ingredients needed to solve our educational problems. (p. 6)

He deplores their influence but is sanguine that they will not last: "The continual plague of romantic problem solvers in education will only disappear, as have plagues of the past, when the proper antidotes have been developed" (p. 6). And these antidotes are to be found in "the deep-running theories of the kind that have driven alchemists out of chemistry and astrologers out of astronomy" (p.6).

Despite Suppes' certainty and conviction in the merit of empiricism, the dominance of the scientific empiricist version of theory development was already being challenged in

the 1970s. However, the kind of approach that he espouses; one that promises answers to the practical problems of 'effective' and 'efficient' practice and to decision-making and priority setting continues to have considerable appeal at least rhetorically to policy makers and politicians, and indeed to some practitioners.

The empiricist model of research was challenged, and continues to be challenged, on the basis of its claim that scientific models of theory are even possible in education. The argument has been that arriving at 'deeply structured' universal theories, is not possible when educational researches are working with complex social environments and with humans with diverse histories, access to different social and cultural resources and so on.

The challenges to the empiricism of the 1970s came from a number of quarters. Ironically, Besant and Holbrook (1995) suggest that it was the scientific inspired behaviourist work in education in the 1960s and 1970s that first attracted the criticisms of irrelevance; they were victims of their own rhetoric, they could not provide 'universal truths' in a context when politicians and bureaucrats were wanting practical answers applicable to what were perceived as current educational problems. They quote Husén (1994, cited in Bessant & Holbrook, 1995):

> Those who turn to social science research in order to find out about the 'best' pedagogy or the most 'efficient' methods of teaching are in a way victims of the traditional science which claimed to be able to arrive at generalizations applicable in practically every context. (p. 234)

Further challenges were driven by 'paradigmatic changes' and arguments for 'qualitative methodologies' and others by those drawing on social theory (and specifically critical social theory). These are not necessarily separate, both very much informed by their opposition to a technocratic and scientistic view of research, but they are also certainly not the same thing. For both, there was a concern to take students' experience into account and to understand the world as complex, but for those writing from a critical theory position, influenced by the work of Michael Apple, Henry Giroux and, in Australia, what might be called the Deakin school, there was a concern to literally critique the status quo, to 'penetrate the world of objective appearances to expose the underlying social relationships they often conceal' (Giroux, 2001, p. 8) with a view to promoting self-emancipation and social change. Fundamental to this is a critique of the technocratic rationality of science and methodologies based on its premises.

The paradigmatic shift in the research from the dominance of scientific empiricism ('positivism', 'naive realism') using quantitative methodologies to a constructivist view of reality ('relativists') favouring qualitative research methods in Australia is

documented in Besant and Holbrook (1995) in *Reflections on Educational Research* under the heading of the 'Paradigm Wars'. They suggest that the 'wars' were somewhat muted in Australia compare to the United States but that there was still a marked shift in ways of thinking about research problems and doing research. Although this often seems to be couched simply as quantitative/qualitative divide, I would argue that it is a more complex struggle around epistemological and ontological positions. This complex relationship between deep-seated ontological and epistemological differences seems often to be lost in texts and teaching about research methods. At the same time, the representation of quantitative vs qualitative as a neat binary misrepresents the range of positions in each and the overlap in practice, for example, the emphasis in some versions of qualitative methodologies on the verifiability of data and accuracy.

I would suggest that it is also overlooked in the current celebrations around the possibilities of 'mixed' methods (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). This is not to say that mixed methods are not a viable form of data collection. From my point of view, however, what is missing from such accounts are the differences in the ways such data are treated and explained. Educational researchers concerned with social justice have collected and used quantitative data to argue for inequalities in educational processes and outcomes for decades. However, the ontological and epistemological positions underpinning most contemporary qualitative methodologies take reality to be contingent on context and meanings constituted through the interactions of participants and researchers (via recording devices, surveys, written texts and so on). This does not sit easily to my mind with positions that emphasise objectivity and assume a shared reality and discoverable causal relationships. The arguments for mixed methods do not always take 'theory' sufficiently into account, but simply seem to celebrate a shift in the standoff position between approaches that are assumed to be in a binary opposition.

Critical social theory

The ascendance of qualitative research in the 1970s also signalled the growing interest in what Besant and Holbrook (1995) describe as "critical theories": "They can be best grouped as social theorists but include among their ranks, postmodernists, post-structuralists, feminists, critical theorists, to name some" (p. 256). As Besant and Holbrook suggest, researchers drawing on such positions "set the proverbial cat amongst the pigeons" (p.256) because they brought into question the very nature of knowledge, they were interested in relations of power and in investigating inequalities. They were interested in pedagogy as a complex relationship and curriculum as a social construction.

The group of writers in the symposium led by Stephen Ball (2006a) published in *Discourse* are contemporary exemplifications of this approach. From Ball's perspective, contemporary social theory should not only encourage researchers to avoid foreclosure of ways of describing the world but should also expect that they continue to be reflexive about theory as well as using theory to reflect. He writes:

> [working with Foucault and Bourdieu] means giving up on spontaneous empiricism, casual [*sic*] epistemologies, theory by numbers, and constantly struggling against governmentalities of scientism to find a proper rigour, a thoughtful and practical rigour – that goes beyond the niceties and safety of technique to find a form of epistemological practice that is not simply self-regarding. (pp. 5-6)

In the *Discourse* collection of papers, Ball discusses how Foucault and Bourdieu, have enabled his analysis of social class. David Gillborn (2006) and Deborah Youdell (2006) demonstrate the utility of Critical Race Theory and Foucault and Bulter to their project of challenging racism and educational inequalities. Gillborn's paper, for example, argues for and describes critical race theory as offering:

> a coherent and challenging set of important sensitising insights and conceptual tools . . . offers a challenge to educational studies more generally, and to the sociology of education in particular, to cease the empty citation of 'race' as just another point of departure on a list of exclusions to be mentioned and then bracketed away. (Gillborn, 2006, p. 27)

Youdell (2006) in her paper argues for the contribution of post structural theories of the power and the subject to understanding educational inequalities as a way of making "sense of, and identif[ing] ways of interrupting abiding educational exclusions and inequalities" (p. 33).

In the next section of the paper I use the approach taken by the *Discourse* papers, and specifically Ball's idea of theory as a 'conceptual tool box', to provide some ideas about the utility of theory to do 'good' research. I exemplify this through my use of theory in making sense of the problem of 'obesity epidemic' and its impact on children and schools.

The utility of theory in educational research

There seems to be general agreement at least among those writing about theory and certainly in social science research texts that theory is important in the making of good research; indeed, that it is impossible to do research without theory.

> All observations of the social world are shaped either consciously or unconsciously by social theory – such theory highlights or erases what might be observed. (Kinchenloe & Berry, 2004, cited in Sikes, 2006, p.43)
>
> We need theories – in other words plausible explanations for what's going on – to live by . . . Theory is essential and inescapable. (Sikes, 2006, p. 43)

However, there is less consensus around what is meant by theory. As already heard above, for Suppes (1974) theory is 'the outcome of rigorous empirical work using scientific methods'. For Neuman (2006), social theory is ' a system of interconnected ideas that condenses and organizes the knowledge about the social world and explains how it works' (p.8). For most writers, it seems about relationships between ideas or constructs, and about connecting the particular, or local, in some way with the more general.

Sikes (2006) argues that theory is about making "the familiar strange and the strange familiar, to challenge the taken-for-granted . . . providing a foundation for transformative action" (p. 45), but also argues that we "need to be critical and reflexive of the theory we use, not a set of 'pregiven inflexible, tightly defined . . . overarching' suppositions to fit data to" (p. 46).

From my perspective, one of the most useful ways of talking about theory to research students is Ball's notion of theory as a conceptual toolbox, not valuable for its own sake but for the work that it can do as a means of analysis and a system of reflexivity.

> Theory is both constructive in providing tools to make sense of our data, and for thinking about the relationships of our data to social processes and social structures. (Ball, 2006a, p.1)

Although Ball (and Sikes) are writing about social theory, the notion of a conceptual tool box provides a way of talking to research students about both small t and big T theory as these are relevant to their research, but at the same time to argue for a reflexivity about the theories that could be used. Clearly there is no simple or one answer to which theories might be useful; this will depend on the researcher, 'the research problem' and for the student, their supervisor. Choosing appropriate theory/ies takes time; it will often evolve as the data prompts the need for explanation.

Working from the margins as a feminist, and later working with ideas from 'critical pedagogy', it has been impossible to be unaware of theory. When you are working to challenge the taken-for-granted, to make the invisible visible, you cannot escape theory, it is your ally. It addresses the 'if this … then this' relationship. There is a constant requirement to reflect on what is 'good' and for whom, to negotiate changing

notions of 'equality', feminism and contested areas such as social class, race, ethnicity and ability. It is difficult to work with an 'oppositional imagination' (Cocks, 1989) without making starting point assumptions (theory) visible and defending them. Without my conceptual toolbox I would not be able to work; it has provided guidance in conceptualising research problems, in framing research questions and in developing an analytical framework to interrogate the data. And then in taking interpretation to explanation (Fairclough, 1995) – to answering the 'so what' question that enables an analysis of everything from one interview text to a large corpus of interviews and observations and to have something to say beyond the immediate context.

Theory is, thus, not about a priori categories but the search to make sense. As Cocks (1989) says of political theory its usefulness depends on:

> its agility in beginning with what actually is and then moving in all sorts of directions beyond it. There, theory can work to unearth the hidden complexities of 'what is'. It can speculate about what else there could be or should be, besides it. It can determine how possibility might be transformed into actuality, and which social groups would be most likely to carry the transformation out. (p. 2)

From my perspective theory has provided, not the feeling of working in some rarified space, but very practical solutions to ways of understanding a problem. The excitement of working with data is often finding something in the data that needs to be understood and which I do not yet have the conceptual tools at my disposal to do so. The reading and talking that it takes to help make sense of the data in ways which connect the specific words or talk of a young person, teacher or the text of a document with more pervasive social ideas and/or practices is for me part of the way of growing as a researcher. An example from the past is how in my doctoral research I began to see patterns in teachers' practices (and specifically their talk) in physical education lessons that created particular forms of gender relations. This was my introduction to poststructuralism, linguistics and social semiotics; an introduction that has served me well.

The process still goes on. Most recently I have turned my attention to the ways in which particular health discourses associated with the obesity epidemic have been taken up in schools. In this second half of the paper then I will illustrate the utility of theory in my research on health, pedagogy and curriculum; how theory has helped me frame research problems and develop an analytical framework. My previous research in the area of young people, health and physical activity (Wright & Burrows, 2004; Wright, O'Flynn, & Macdonald, 2006) has taken me inevitably into the domain of the 'obesity epidemic', an idea that has had considerable purchase in the popular

consciousness via amongst other avenues the popular press and in schools, particularly in physical and health education. The pervasiveness of the 'obesity epidemic' as an idea, even amongst colleagues who are usually more socially aware, its constant reiteration in reports on health, where obesity has been cited as a factor in almost all forms of chronic disease from diabetes to cancer through to mental health issues, is difficult to resist. So why resist it? If I were to take an empiricist approach, as many of my physical education colleagues have done, the task would be to develop ways of improving practice and/or developing interventions that would address the problem – that is, the problem that 'children are becoming more obese'.

However, as a researcher who draws on social theory, the first step is to 'problematise' the taken-for-granted truths about the 'obesity epidemic' and to raise questions about its effects as an idea which has had so much purchase. My own research with young people and that of colleagues such as John Evans, Emma Rich and Lisette Burrows around their understandings of health and their bodies, proposed another way of looking at the 'problem' from that offered by the epidemiological and medical version of the obesity epidemic. This includes data that suggest that children of younger and younger ages are preoccupied with their weight, equate weight as indicated by body shape with health and engage in practices to monitor their weight and maintain a thin body shape (Burrows, Wright, & Jungersen-Smith, 2002; Burrows & Wright, 2007). It includes data that indicate that young women and increasingly young men are preoccupied with eating and sometimes physical activity because of fears of becoming fat and some of those young women and young men are developing eating disorders at least some of which can be attributed to a social preoccupation with the thin/not fat body (Rich & Evans, 2005; Rich, Holroyd, & Evans, 2004).

How can such data be understood and more importantly be explained beyond the rich though often small number of examples from qualitative research? The rhetoric of the obesity epidemic derives its authority from science, recontextualised in the reporting of epidemiological research, health and medical research in the media. There are at least weekly articles in local and national newspapers based on the taken-for-granted premise that there is an obesity epidemic and it is the responsibility of every individual, parents, doctors, schools and governments to act to reduce what has been described as an escalating phenomenon, costing the nation millions of dollars. To contest such a pervasive idea, which not only fits with western (and increasingly globalised) ideas of the acceptable body, and is sanctioned by the expertise of science and economics, requires a very robust set of theoretical resources.

Any theories would need to be persuasive in the face of the certainty of the 'scientific' knowledge used to argue for the importance of interventions. One option is to take

on the scientists on their own terms and many researchers have done this (see Campos, Saguy, Ernsberger, Oliver, & Gaesser, 2006; Gard & Wright, 2005) by challenging the propositions of science on the basis of their own empiricist criteria of 'truth'; that is on the basis of quality of the methodology, the interpretations and theorising from the data/the statistics. However, this still leaves the question, 'why does it matter', and for this I argue we need theories which connect the social with the ways individuals make sense of themselves and others.

As a sociologist, I base my critique on calling the 'truths' of the 'obesity epidemic' into question, by asking how they are constituted and to the benefit of whom. And perhaps most importantly as an educator I ask: What are the consequences of the ideas and practices associated with the discourse of the 'obesity epidemic' for children and young people; how are these truths re-contextualised in schools and with what effects for school priorities, for what counts as health and physical education and how do these recontextualised knowledges impact on students?

And so I and my colleagues (Valerie Harwood from Australia, John Evans and Emma Rich from the UK, Lisette Burrrows from New Zealand) draw on poststructuralist theories and for this project at this stage, are using Bernstein (2000) to examine how the health discourses associated with the 'obesity epidemic' are constituted *within* the three levels of policy, schools and individual understandings and how they are recontextualised *between* levels. We are using Foucault's (Rabinow & Rose, 2006) notion of biopower to ask how health discourses and their recontextualisation in schools operate as techniques of power to contribute to the regulation of individuals and populations and with what effects for how individuals understand and act on their own and others' bodies?

These are the theories that at this stage have helped pose the problem; they have guided our choices of sites, data collection and the developing analytical framework. They will certainly not be the limit of the theoretical resources that will be deployed, as we engage more directly with data (still being collected) and respond to different issues. Part of the excitement of the research will be (together) exploring, discussing new possibilities for ways of explaining the data and speaking to those different audiences whom we wish to affect.

Conclusion

Like Ball and others I have cited, I would argue that theory is inescapable and absolutely necessary for good educational research. This does not depend on what we mean by theory. Suppes would share this conviction – he argued against empiricism without attention to theory. For Suppes, however, the purpose of research was to

develop theories that could provide strong defensible guides to action, to decision-making and teaching, and to priority setting in education – necessarily a narrow focus. The balance has somewhat shifted at least in the ways of thinking and the kinds of theory that people use (making my judgements on papers at AARE, at BERA and AERA); there is a recognition of the complexity of classroom life, the influence of social and cultural contexts. There is a recognition of the world as "complicated, confused, impure, uncertain" (Bourdieu et al., cited in Ball, 2006b); there is a proliferation of theories to meet the needs of education in changing times. There is a great deal of choice which can be both exciting and confusing.

Deciding on, understanding and working with theory is not something that can be done hurriedly. It requires time: time to read from the original theorists, to read critiques, to make sense of different languages, to weigh up ideas, to find papers that help bridge the gap between incomprehensibility and understanding; and time to discuss, debate and test out ideas. I would argue that more attention needs to be paid to the place of theory in the preparation of researchers; in training future researchers, we need also to be training future thinkers. It may be that research method subjects are not the best space to do this and that research training in education should include dedicated spaces to discuss and debate theory.

The time to read and think about theory has become increasing difficult in the contemporary context of external measures of accountability in higher education, with expectations of 'timely' completion of research degrees and, despite the rhetoric around quality, the pressure to publish. The focus on impact in the Research Quality Framework has also brought into sharp relief a discussion that has been going on for some time about the contribution of research to the national good (Donovan, 2005) and the value of educational research in a context where governments and funding agencies look to utility, evidence and measurable outcomes (Besant & Holbrook, 1995). In this context we can ask what theories are possible and what not?

An article by Neil Eckardt's (2007) in the *Teachers' College Record* on the 'Prevalence of qualitative methodology at AERA's Annual Meeting and the potential consequences' points to positions from both within and without education that challenge the place of qualitative research and research informed by social theory, both on the familiar grounds of scientific quality, and on the grounds of usefulness. Eckardt begins by quoting online articles by Frederick Hess from the American Enterprise Institute and Laura LoGerfo that argue that AERA members do not focus enough on "analysing public policy, improving teaching and learning, and addressing the practical concerns of parents and teachers' and that 'a lot of educational research is 'ideological, frivolous, poorly executed and jargon laden'" (para. 2). Ekhardt interprets this as indicating that "too many studies at AERA suffer from very small sample sizes and are not conducted

systematically" (para. 3). This allows Eckardt to develop the main point of the article which is that qualitative studies, mixed method research or "conceptual/theoretical" scholarship cannot add anything to "developing applied scientific knowledge of educational phenomena". "Similarly", he argues the prominence of qualitative studies raises "the question of . . . the field's inability to build a shared, common domain of knowledge or even an accepted jargon-free discourse" (para. 7). These criticism of theoretically informed research (jargon-laden) are not new, but they are of concern in a context where, as Eckardt points out, governments are scrutinising educational research and seeking at least in the US to 'transform' its culture. Once again, research that claims to be scientific, value-free and useful is framed in opposition to research that is "detrimental to the development of accepted concepts and shared ideas" (para. 8).

In this context what is the value of research informed by social theory, which seeks to question the taken-for-granted, which eschews certainty and which often offers challenges to well established and accepted policies and practices. The very contingency of qualitative research makes its utility less apparent to bureaucrats and politicians – and to the media. The self-proclaimed 'critical' platform of social theory is also not likely to find favour in a context where government and systems are actively silencing dissent through the burying of reports contrary to prevailing policy (Hamilton & Maddison, 2007) or preventing research that might challenge policy to go ahead in schools, through gate keeping ethics requirements. As Geoff Whitty (2006), in his presidential address to BERA says: "while some of our work will be aligned in various ways to the [UK] Government's agenda, some of it will necessarily be regarded by government as irrelevant or useless . . . some of it may well be seen as oppositional" (p. 162). He argues that universities must "defend an inclusive concept of education" and urges BERA to "resist any pressure to restrict what counts as research in education". One would hope that AARE would take a similar position and continue to support a range of research. What would also be useful for AARE is to take more of a lead in fostering an understanding of the place of theory and the debates around it amongst educational researchers and research students. This could take the form of a dedicated journal issue, workshops for research students and early career researchers, a series on different theoretical perspectives in the AARE newsletter and even web-based discussions. Robust educational research requires robust theory whatever form it might take.

Endnotes

[1] The Australian RQF has now been abandoned in its present form by the newly elected Rudd Labor government. However as Donovan (2005) points out the usefulness of research to the national good, however that is defined, is an enduring theme.

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