

J. P. POWELL

The University, Manchester, England

Another Look at Theory and Practice in Education

The activities in which teachers, doctors and lawyers engage when they are performing their professional tasks are compounded of a mixture of practical skills and abstract theories which issue in actions. Teaching, for example, is not simply a piece of behaviour on a par with sneezing or breathing: it is an activity governed by the intention to bring about learning on the part of pupils and is thus associated with some theories — I use this term in a very general sense here — concerned with how this intention may best be realized. Practical activities of this kind are always theory-laden in that they would be quite unintelligible if they were simply characterized by the doing of certain things rather than others. Such activities as those which are intended to bring about learning, the restoration of health, or success for a client in court, are necessarily conducted against a background of theory: there is thus no sharp contrast between theory and practice such that there could be some practice without any theory. This is a point worth noting since it is not unheard of for practitioners to conceive of themselves as 'practical men' who can get along perfectly well without the aid of theory.

Allowing that a certain amount of theorising is a necessary feature of engaging in a practical activity it still remains to clarify the nature of the relationship between theory and practice. Teaching is an activity which we can do and which we can talk about, but the connection between the doing and the talking is obscure. The apparent possibility of a disjunction between theory and practice has sometimes led to unfortunate misunderstandings between practitioners and theoreticians.¹ 'Academic lawyers,' for example, are sometimes thought of by barristers and solicitors as being concerned with issues which appear to have little relevance to the realities of the court-room and the skills which are required for the successful conduct of cases. It is not unknown for teachers to be cynical about the results and value of educational research carried out by people who are remote from the classroom, and theoreticians often suppose (in private at least) that teachers proceed largely by rule of thumb and lack any *rationale* for what they do. In general,

¹See E. Gellner, *Thought and Change* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1964), pp. 198 ff.

we would expect such conflicts to be most in evidence in fields where abstract ideas abound and where successful practice is both hard to achieve and difficult to define: education undoubtedly offers an outstanding example of such a field.

That there are such conflicts should not evoke surprise for it is only in quite recent times that physicians, engineers and teachers have had very much to rely upon by way of theory. Formerly they managed as well as they could largely by applying rule of thumb and following in the methodological footsteps of their predecessors. The theoretical background to their practice was often both faulty and grossly inadequate, although this was not commonly recognized at the time. Teachers picked up their skills and knowledge on the job, for there seemed to be little to be known which they could not quite easily discover for themselves in the course of their work. Training colleges for teachers conceived their task mainly in terms of passing on information about teaching methods and in attempting to cultivate in students a minimal competence in the skills of classroom management. There was widespread public agreement about what should be taught, how it should be taught and the types of institution in which learning should take place.

This situation has now been transformed almost beyond recognition. Education is now a central issue in public debate and there is no longer a consensus on any of these matters. The changed social role of the teacher makes much more onerous demands upon his skill, judgment and intelligence than was the case even twenty-five years ago. He can no longer appeal to a received body of opinion for guidance in his classroom activities. This, in turn, has led to a rapid growth in the body of theory which is associated with education without, unfortunately, being accompanied by an adequate appreciation of the connections between theory and practice. The widespread failure to understand the very different functions which theorising about education performs has been largely responsible for much of the theory remaining in a primitive condition as well as for many of the inadequacies in the professional training of teachers.

It is possible to discern at least three kinds of theorising associated with education and each of them has a distinct function in relation to the practical activity of teaching. If these distinctions can be made with sufficient clarity, then we shall be better able to make rational decisions about the content and purposes of professional training courses. We may also hope for some reduction in the misunderstandings between practitioners and theoreticians.

The first type of theory might be called the 'theory of instruction' since it is directly related to teaching as a practical activity. I am using the term 'theory' very generally here to refer to any discussion of or reflection upon a situation in which someone attempts to teach

something to someone else.² Whenever a teacher asks himself why a particular lesson failed or succeeded, or discusses such questions with his colleagues, then he is exploring an area of the theory of instruction. Most of the discussions between students and their teaching-practice supervisors also involve this type of theory: they are talking about what the student actually did in the classroom in the light of existing knowledge of what makes for successful teaching. Such discussions will be characterised by close attention to particulars: to individual pupils, questions and answers, significant incidents, the student's actions and the children's responses. For more generalised theories concerning the requirements for successful teaching and learning we would expect help from psychologists, and for guidance on how best to teach particular subjects to particular groups of children we would seek the help of skilful and experienced teachers. But in all such cases our thinking could be described as theorizing about instruction in that it would be primarily directed towards improving the actual practice of teaching. There is no conflict here between theory and practice since whatever is being said is seen to be immediately relevant to the day-to-day problems which confront the practitioner.

It is perhaps necessary to put in a disclaimer at this point. I am not suggesting that we cannot engage in practical activities without explicitly theorising about what we are doing, since it is obvious that we can often carry off highly skilled performances without being able to give a coherent account of what we are doing or of what is involved in doing it well. The skill of a craftsman is not diminished if he is unable to describe what his skill consists of a point which was noticed in the Plowden Report: "It was interesting that some of the head teachers who were considered by H. M. Inspectors to be most successful in practice were least able to formulate their aims clearly and convincingly."³ Nevertheless, most of our practical activities are theory-laden in the sense that they are carried on in the light of a set of beliefs, expectations and intentions, even though it may often be difficult for us to express these in a coherent form.

There is another corpus of theory which is related to teaching in a much less direct manner: this might be called the 'theory of education.' This is concerned, in the main, with much larger questions than those which arise out of the actual practice of teaching something to someone on a particular occasion: it relates to what has been called 'the essential background to rational educational practice.'⁴ Educational theory is concerned with education as an enterprise rather than with teaching as an activity. Much of it will have some bearing upon teaching but the

²See M. Oakeshott, "Learning and Teaching," in *The Concept of Education*, R. S. Peters, editor (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967).

³*Children and their Primary Schools, Vol. I* (London: H.M.S.O., 1967), para. 497.

⁴P. H. Hirst, "Educational Theory," in *The Study of Education*, J. W. Tibble, editor (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 40.

connection will be an indirect one. Its main concern will be with questions of social policy, with the structure of educational institutions, with the content and justification of the curriculum and with the general problems of what ought to be done in education. Educational theory will thus require the collaborative efforts of people who possess very different skills and knowledge: sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, politicians, teachers and parents. Also located within this realm of theory will be the work of particular theorists who have advocated one way in which education might be conceived: the works of Alfred North Whitehead, John Dewey and A. S. Neill are obvious examples.

A current example of a piece of educational theory can be seen in the debate on 'comprehensive schooling.' This raises a great many problems involving both facts and values which require contributions from many disciplines for their solution. If we seek to arrive at a rational decision about whether or not to re-organise schools along 'comprehensive' lines, then the relevant body of educational theory is the obvious place to look for guidance. Yet it appears equally obvious that if we are wondering how best to cope with the 4B class this afternoon, it would be a mistake to expect educational theory to provide the answer: its connection with practice is not *that* direct.

There is a third type of theorising about education which I shall call the 'theory of educational ideas.' The only connection between this body of theory and education as an enterprise is that it takes the latter as its raw material; the link with teaching as a practical activity is even more tenuous. Thus philosophers, historians, economists, sociologists and anthropologists might choose to take an interest in educational matters simply from the standpoint of their own disciplines without any intention of saying anything which could be professionally useful to teachers and educators. Conceived in this way the history of education would be a branch of historical studies in the same way that the history of science or the history of medieval Europe are branches of history. That is to say, it would be a theoretical structure arising from the distinctive concerns of historians and intended to add to our *historical* understanding of educational ideas, practices and institutions.

The gulf between theory and practice is here complete, for what this third type of theory attempts to do is to offer different kinds of explanation for what is being done and these explanations are quite irrelevant to actual practice. In order to engage in the activity of riding a bicycle we need to have learnt certain skilled movements, but the fact that cycling is possible may be explained in terms of some of the laws of Newtonian physics. Knowledge of these laws, however, contributes nothing to the skilfulness of a cyclist and would be no help whatever in teaching or learning the skill.⁵ The theory of educational ideas is

⁵Oakeshott, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

similarly disconnected from educational practice and thus belongs in a distinct logical category from the other two types of theory.

The peculiar character of the theory of educational ideas has passed largely un-noticed and this has led to a great deal of muddled thinking and confusion. Many people have supposed that anything said about education must have something to do with teaching and when theorists have conspicuously failed to produce the required goods their work has sometimes been condemned as being of no value to practising teachers. While this view prevailed, and it is still by no means uncommon, there was little hope of the theoretical study of education getting off the ground since many theorists were simply not interested in the daily practical problems which confront teachers.

Evidence of a new appreciation of the nature of theorising about education, and especially of the distinctive character of the theory of educational ideas, can be found in a recent collection of essays on the study of education.⁶ Peters claims that the study of philosophy, history or sociology will be of no direct use to intending teachers but that as a result they "will gradually have their view of children, schools, and subjects transformed."⁷ Simon argues that "No claim should be made that the study of the history of education directly affects the practice of the teacher in the classroom."⁸ Taylor explicitly denies that there is any link between the study of sociology and the improvement of classroom technique. The study of sociology, he says, is justified because it helps the teacher in "thinking logically and rationally about the whole range of social phenomena that he encounters in his personal and professional life."⁹

How will a clearer understanding of the nature of educational theorising help those with responsibilities for the training of teachers? The theory of instruction is clearly highly relevant to the needs of intending teachers since it constitutes a body of knowledge directly connected with the skills which they will be required to exercise. If we view teachers as educators rather than instructors then the theory of education becomes probably even more important in a course of professional studies since it helps students to justify and describe what they are doing and to appreciate its wider social significance. The theory of educational ideas, however, is in a different position and its inclusion in a programme of professional studies requires special justification. It might well be argued that teachers should know something about the history of education, for example, but it would be difficult to support this on the grounds that such knowledge would make them more effective in the classroom. Much of the dissatisfaction which students express about training

⁶J. W. Tibble, editor, *The Study of Education* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966).

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 210.

courses could probably be traced to unrealistic expectations concerning much of what they are taught. From the student's interest in educational matters it might be possible to lead him on to explore some history, philosophy, sociology and anthropology, and we may well believe that it would be worthwhile to encourage such interests, but it would be fraudulent to suggest that they will help him to cope with 4B more successfully.