Alice Boberg *

Linking Theory and Practice: The Practitioners' Views

Few fields of study have generated as much research as education, with such a paucity of results.[1] Current criticisms of the education system suggest a slowness in responding to societal change, quite possibly resulting from a reluctance or even an inability to readily apply current theory to practice. The tendency has been to blame the teachers for a lack of professional maturity in keeping abreast and applying theory to the classroom. If such accusations are being made then perhaps the teachers should be permitted to respond. And so they do in this paper. **

Let me begin with a parable, of sorts, written by a principal.

> In the mid 1800's a company of settlers left Iowa and headed west to find new land and wealth, the group consisted of 10 wagons drawn by plodding oxen. It was led by a captain and two scouts. The scouts' job was to find the fastest and safest route through the plains and over the mountains.
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> Each morning the scouts would ride out, scout the land and leave marks for the wagon train to follow. However, because they were riding horses they sometimes overlooked the fact that wagons cannot traverse ground that a horse can. They miscalculated the width of the wagon and so expected the company to follow through trees that were too close. They miscalculated the weight of the wagon and the oxen power needed to pull them up steep inclines or hold them back while descending slopes.
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> Because of these mistakes, the scouts would often pick campsites that were beyond the reach of the company. Conflicts arose between the two groups. The scouts felt the company was too slow or lazy while the company questioned the route that the scouts picked.[2]

The parable exemplifies one of the major conflicts that lies — not between theory and practice — but between the theorist and the practitioner. One of the major obstacles to collaboration is the walls that have been built between the universities and the field and between the roles they have assumed as "gatekeepers of theory" and "champions of practice." Indictments from the practitioners' side include: researchers tend to exaggerate the problem; research findings are not relevant to all in the field; researchers attack teachers' positions resulting in defensive activities; and researchers are interested in the research for their own personal benefit.

Teachers have been alleged to be immature professionally. Whether this is founded or not, the fact of the matter is that to encourage professional growth and maturity teachers must be involved in the determination of their own tasks. Wood, Thompson, and Russell suggest that " . . . it is critical to involve participants in selecting at least some objectives, activities and materials" which generate needed " . . . control over their own learning and makes them responsible for their own professional growth."[3] The practitioners recommend that research projects, especially those that deal with teaching-learning in the classroom, should be determined, in part, by those who have to cope with the everyday problems, with a focus on the student-teacher interaction in the classroom.

While not the major hurdle in linking theory and practice, about half of the practitioners suggest that their difficulties often originate from lack of socialization into the profession during teacher

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* Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Policy and Administrative Studies, The University of Calgary.

** The practitioners were eighteen graduate students, including both teachers and principals, registered in a summer graduate course in the Department of Educational Policy and Administrative Studies.

training. One new teacher commented: "Teacher training in reality is an employment game. Everyone plays the game to get good grades and a job." Such ideas, if commonly held, suggest that universities have been remiss in their obligation to instill proper attitudes toward education and the development of logically consistent ideas about educational means and ends. However, universities are not alone in their obligation to socialize new teachers. Most noted incidences in the student teaching experience and the first years of teaching in which theories taught at the university could be nurtured or destroyed by comments of more experienced teachers.

A major obstacle in reducing the tension involved in integrating theory into practice is the view, too often held, that teacher training ends after the practicum program. The practitioners took to task the current in-service practices that are often bland and repetitive and which turn teachers away from further professional development.

The tendency has been to present theory in the course of a one-shot workshop, paying little attention to the reality of the implementation processes. The underlying assumption in these practices is that " . . . if educators are exposed to carefully presented and understandable research findings they will recognize the wisdom of the results and immediately employ them in their daily practise."[4] While participants may appear enthusiastic they seldom follow through. Presenting research findings is not enough. Participants in the research must be cognizant of its difficulty level and adequate time is essential for proper development and implementation.[5] The research needs to be implemented across the entire school organization emphasizing the fact that the teacher is a member of a group and counter the notion that the teacher is an independent practitioner. The very nature of the teacher's isolation or independence in the classroom currently precludes such activities and acts as an inhibitor to professional growth.

The environment and the context work against collaboration and/or integrating theory into practice. The lack of commitment to such endeavors at all levels of administration was noted by all the practitioners. Research projects often are a burden added to already heavy workloads.[6] The support system provides very few incentives in terms of release time and rewards. Even sabbaticals work against improvement when there are few available. One writer noted that, "The strong element of competition led to apathy among the potential applicants. Most teachers that did apply felt they would not be selected."

Inertia is a concern. Joyce and Showers suggest that inertia can only be overcome if the system creates a synergistic environment where collaborative enterprises are both normal and sustaining and where continuous training and study both of academic substance and the craft of teaching are woven into the fabric of the school, bringing satisfaction by virtue of an increasing sense of growth and competence.[7]

To introduce this new ethos, as the practitioners suggest, would require risk-taking and leadership. However, risk-taking that would provide for different reward structures and perhaps innovative organizational arrangements would threaten the stability of the system and thus are precluded. A principal noted, "Of underlying importance to the whole issue is the concern that we do not create an atmosphere in which teachers are encouraged to experiment and take risks in the interest of improving instruction in the classroom."

Even if principals are concerned they are subject to the political pressures and the political climates of the time. In almost all school jurisdictions today, the accountability movement puts pressures on administration and teachers to conform to the requirements of measurable evaluations of student performance which indirectly are used to evaluate teachers and schools. The current

political and public pressures support conformity and conservatism. Risk-taking is dangerous in such a climate.

In addition, to affect collaborative research a change in the perceived role(s) of participants is necessary. It is essential that researchers perceive their role in fieldwork as being positive, valuable and contributory and not as a penalizing experience unworthy of academic pursuit. (It goes without saying that this is not always the case.) Teachers in the field need to be accorded collegial status coupled with a chance to determine the nature of the study. Such new roles could come into conflict with the multiple roles teachers currently assume. But the practitioners feel that it is time teachers reflected upon what the teacher's professional role should be.

Finally, the practitioners noted that teachers are skeptical of the positivist paradigm and the generalizability of data.[8] The practitioners noted the current debate that rages between idealists and realists within academia. They question which theory to apply and which answer will help them in the classroom. They recognize Schwab's criticisms of administrative theorists:

> Educators have applied theories from the behavioural sciences toward solution of practical problems as if these borrowed theories could be applied simply and directly. Meanwhile, educators themselves as well as others bear witness to the fact that problems so attacked have been poorly solved. Extant curriculum with the stamp of theoretical legitimation often fail in practice. Teaching which is coherent with theory often misses its practical mark.[9]

Two practitioners suggested that theory is meaningless in the context of the classroom. If theories are to be discounted, how will research be accomplished — by trial and error. Without a bank of theoretical dimensions, success in any experience is only accidental. As Downey has stated, "There can be no practice without principles of some kind."[10]

To sum up, if we are to effect meaningful integration of theory and practice in our schools every effort must be made to understand the school as an organization and the ways people behave in it. If schools are being perceived as less than effective in carrying out their mandate, then we, as researchers and educators must look critically at what we are doing. John Goodlad would have us change and improve the school by totally altering the fabric of our lives through the creation of an educative society.[11] Ideally this would be a solution. Realistically, I would suggest that we start through the creation of an educative teaching profession by removing the walls between the universities and the schools and developing mutual trust and respect.

Notes

1. Paul Longo, "Our Attempts at Educational Change are Programmed for Failure," *Educational Leadership*, (December, 1982), p. 70.
2. Name withheld. Students were encouraged to be honest and sincere in their responses in exchange for guaranteed anonymity.
3. Fred H. Wood, Steven R. Thompson, and Sister Francis, "Designing Effective Staff Development Programs," in *Staff Development/Organization Development*, ed. Betty Dillon-Peterson (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1981), pp. 59 - 92.
4. William J. Tikunoff and John R. Mergendoller, "Inquiry as a Means to Professional Growth: The Teacher as Researcher," in *Staff Development*, ed. Gary A. Griffin (Chicago, Ill.: National Society for the Study of Education, 1983), pp. 210-227.
5. Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers, *Power in Staff Development Through Research on Training*. (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1983).

6. Heavy workloads have been found to be major stressors for teachers. For a quick review see Leory D. Klas, "Time Management: The Most Significant Stressor for Teachers?" *Newsletter*, Canadian Education Association, (September, 1984).

7. Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers, *op. cit.*

8. See William Tikunoff and John Mergendoller, *op. cit.* for further elaboration on this topic. John Steinbruner has also noted, "If quantitative precision is demanded, it is gained in the current state of things, only by so reducing the scope of what is analysed that most of the important problems remain external to the analysis." John Steinbruner, *The Cybernetic Theory of Decision: New Dimensions of Political Analysis* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 328.

9. Joseph J. Schwab, *Science, Curriculum and Liberal Education.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 322.

10. M. E. Downey and A. V. Kelly, *Theory and Practice of Education.* (London: Harper and Row, Pubs., 1975).

11. John I. Goodlad, *What Schools Are For.* (Bloomington, Indiana: Phi Delta Kappan, Inc., 1979), pp. 106-107. See also *A Place Called School*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1984).