
THEORY

AND PRACTICE

IN EDUCATION

R F Dearden

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R.F. Dearden



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INTRODUCTION

The thirteen papers which constitute the present collection were each written for a separate occasion and can consequently be read quite independently of each other. Nevertheless, the grouping of them into four parts is not arbitrary. It draws attention to a degree of community of theme and what is mentioned only in passing in one is often taken up and developed in a following paper.

In a very general sense every one of these papers could be said to be about the relation of theory to practice in education, but that relation is the especial concern of the first, from which the collection as a whole takes its title. Various strategies may be adopted by new professors in giving their inaugural lectures but my own chosen one in this piece was to review the state of educational theory. I tried to characterise its nature, considered the notion of 'application' as it applies to educational theory and concluded with some comments on justification. The topic is one on which any philosopher of education should be ready to declare himself on account of its generality of bearing, its perennial interest and indeed its political urgency.

Chapters two to four continue with this self-consciousness about theory. Philosophy of education as just one of the educational disciplines is the particular concern of chapter two. This piece was commissioned by the editor of the 'British Journal of Educational Studies' as a contribution to a special issue commemorative of thirty years of the journal, hence its title. I was grateful for the challenge that this occasion provided to review the evolution of the discipline over a period in which it has undergone fundamental changes. I see no reason now to wish to modify the sombre look into the future with which I ended that piece, and indeed the only editorial emendation that I have made for the present collection is to omit the first two paragraphs of the original article since they related rather specifically to the commemorative occasion.

Chapter three was written for a very strange conference in Naples which, through some organisational problems, still had not taken place at the time that this collection was put together. The theme of the conference was a somewhat European concern which falls strangely on British ears, namely the

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'science of pedagogy'. The general idea seemed to be that we had now reached the point when some kind of unified science of education might be possible if only we would all bend our efforts to it. I doubted whether such a project could be carried through, even in principle, and this short piece articulated the grounds for my scepticism. The only possibility which I saw for any such unified science was for the Gordian knot to be cut by a political decision, though that would be intellectually arbitrary.

The relationship of education to politics was, however, the explicit focus for chapter four. Two circumstances gave rise to this piece. The first was the growing prominence of arguments and policy statements which claimed or implied that the state should have control, or at least should have more control, over the curriculum. The second was the in many ways closely analogous debate that occurs in considering the relation of politics to sport, for instance in connection with the 1980 Olympic Games. The piece that I wrote was concerned primarily with the question of whether education could be, rather than ought to be, kept out of politics. I concluded that it could not, but that did not carry with it any direct implication that state control of the curriculum was justified.

Part two concerns the curriculum but contains no grand design or overall prescription for curriculum construction. The occasion for the chapter on balance and coherence was a conference of people who were mainly concerned with philosophy of education but who were also concerned about the spate of reports which had recently issued from the DES and the Inspectorate. It was rightly felt that philosophers of education should give some attention to influential policy documents such as these, as well as to discussing more perennial but abstract themes. In many ways what resulted by way of my own contribution was akin to a piece on needs which I had written in 1966. It seemed to me that although the terms had changed the ambiguities and their political significance were much the same.

The piece on general education is a contribution to the philosophical debate which is usually conducted under the title 'general powers of the mind', a form of words given currency by Paul Hirst in connection with his forms of knowledge thesis. It seemed to me that this theme, which in many ways is a reincarnation of yesterday's preoccupation with transfer of training in psychology, was re-emerging strongly both in recent official reports and in more academic writing. To my own surprise, I concluded that there could well be something in it and that at least some general powers might well be possible, though they could never be sufficient in any particular employment. What seemed to have been overlooked was that although,

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as Hirst had strongly argued, any such general power as problem-solving ability could never be sufficient by itself, it nevertheless did not follow that there could be nothing general. Even if this is true, however, the hope seems excessively over-optimistic that general powers could provide a complete answer to the problems of expansion and obsolescence in knowledge. A man for all seasons would need more, much more, than any general powers could equip him with.

Lawrence Stenhouse's Humanities Curriculum Project has excited philosophical interest ever since it was launched in 1970. Like other philosophers of education, I have felt considerable sympathetic attraction to it but also some serious critical reservations. Chapter seven represents my own coming to terms with the problem of controversial issues in the curriculum and with Stenhouse's principle of procedural neutrality. In general what I did was to suggest a strengthening of his case for the inclusion of controversial material in the curriculum but at the same time I raised doubts about the centrality of the principle of procedural neutrality, and even about whether it deserved to be called a principle at all.

Autonomy has been a major preoccupation of mine since I wrote my 'Philosophy of Primary Education' (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968). It was also the subject of my doctoral dissertation. In various ways this preoccupation surfaces in all four of the chapters which constitute part three. Chapter eight, on the ethics of belief, is the earliest article (1974) contained in the present collection and I reprint it now partly because I see no reason to change it and partly because it seems to me that its theme has never been sufficiently discussed. The principal point that I tried to argue in the piece was that although the assessment of belief is a logical or epistemic matter, nevertheless to engage in such assessment rather than to have one's beliefs determined in one of many other ways was itself a choice which had ethical significance. Intellectual education is a matter not just of becoming familiar with certain content, or even of practising certain skills, but is in an important way a development of character. Associated with missing this aspect of intellectual activity is a model of the mind as an organ for seeing, which conceals the fact that true belief (or at any rate tested belief) is often won only by a struggle. Though I did not mention it in the article, a related teaching problem which had puzzled me for years was that of the frequent inadequacy of clarity of explanation by itself to modify learners.

An invitation from the Froebel Institute to contribute one of a series of Froebel bicentenary lectures on the subject of autonomy gave an opportunity to return to this topic. The occasion explains the early section in the article in which I

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relate autonomy to child-centred education. But the nature of intellectual education took precedence over autonomy as the main explicit theme, though I argued that the two are closely connected in various ways. The theme of the ethics of belief was raised again and I took the opportunity to relate intellectual education not only to character but also to imagination and emotion, on which topics I have always felt especially benefitted by the work of R.K. Elliott and Richard Peters.

With the exception of an article by Antony Flew which I mention in chapter ten, the assessment of learning is a topic which has largely escaped philosophical attention, though one would have expected epistemology and philosophy of mind to have much to say about it. I took the opportunity in the article on this topic to consider some of the epistemic hazards that accompany assessment, the possibility of objectivity in assessing and the place of comparisons in framing judgements about learners.

Behaviourism is a theme on which I touch in several places, for example in chapters one, eight and ten, but behaviour modification is the major concern of chapter eleven. This paper was included in a collection of fourteen articles entitled 'The Behaviourist in the Classroom', edited by Kevin Wheldall (Educational Review Offset Publications No. 1, University of Birmingham, 1981). The collection largely consisted of statements by enthusiasts for behaviour modification, so that my own reservations represented one of the few voices of dissent, or at least caution. Richard Peters had long ago taught me that the main problem with behaviourism was its concept of behaviour, and I applied this judgement in the article. In the course of preliminary reading I was struck, however, by the lack of theoretical unity of commitment amongst practitioners of and propagandists for behaviour modification. They seemed to me to vary from pure Skinnerians to people who were behaviourists in little more than being unusually systematic about their use of ordinary encouragement and discouragement. I am myself convinced, however, that this issue is one of the most important to get right in any educational connection.

The final two articles both relate to primary education and were written with non-specialist audiences and readers in mind. 'Reflections on Plowden' was my contribution to a series on the theme 'Plowden ten years on' which appeared in the journal 'Education 3-13' during 1978. The Plowden Report had itself called for a review after ten years, though with the implication that it would be progress towards Plowden objectives that would be assessed. The primary survey, 'Primary Education in England' (HMSO, 1978), was the Inspectorate's own assessment after ten years, and chapter thirteen in the

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present collection is my own comment on that survey. It was in the course of reading that survey, together with certain other official reports, that I became convinced that general powers of the mind (the theme of chapter six) were making something of a comeback. The 'Oxford Review' article now reprinted as chapter six was a later and more academic treatment of this theme.

I have indicated in this introduction something of the circumstances surrounding the writing of these various papers, not (I hope) from any vain pleasure in autobiography, still less to provide fodder for some sociologists of knowledge, but in the belief that contextual knowledge of such circumstances often helps in understanding what is actually being said. There is an academic tradition which requires as much as possible of oneself to be kept out of what one writes, but it may be questioned whether that tradition is entirely helpful. Pure philosophers range from those, like Spinoza, who conceal everything of themselves to those (I refrain from examples) who write about nothing but themselves. But when a species of theorising is intended to have a bearing on practice, it must surely be relevant to indicate something of the practical concerns and associated statements of policy which occasioned the theorising. Above all this must be true when the relation of theory to practice is one of the themes that is explicitly being discussed.

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Part one
THEORY AND PRACTICE

1 THEORY AND PRACTICE IN EDUCATION

I

The public reception given to a piece of educational research is commonly a function only partly of the research itself, or of its intrinsic interest. In part it will also be a function of the political climate surrounding its publication. Published at one time, and the research may attract little or no attention; published at another and its author is instantly elevated into being a 'teleperson' and 'jet-setter'. Quite as curious is the rise and fall in popularity of the various general branches of educational study. Thus the traditionally well-entrenched educational studies of psychology and of history were for a time outshone, first by philosophy and then by sociology. These in turn were displaced from pre-eminence by curriculum studies, while the most recent candidate for the role of quasi-messianic leadership is the study of management. Each in turn waxes and then wanes, outshone by some newly rising star. I shall resist the temptation to speculate on the possible identity of the next new luminary.

Across these fluctuations, however, it is possible to discern a movement of longer span. I refer to the rise and fall in popularity of theoretical studies as a whole. These rose rapidly in esteem during the early 1960s, encouraged no doubt by the Robbins Report of 1963 with its suggestion that there should be a degree in educational studies, the BEd as it came to be called, and with its suggestion that the colleges were too narrowly conceived as places only of training. Also at this time some very influential articles were published on the nature of educational theory and its relations to practice. For example, Richard Peters persuasively argued for an ending to what he provocatively called 'undifferentiated mush', and for its replacement by studies firmly grounded in the separate theoretical disciplines, such as history, psychology, sociology and philosophy, to name the four that became canonical. (1) Major series of student texts were published under the eye of general editors whose appointments intentionally fell within these divisions. And, perhaps for the first time, a major government report on some aspect of education, the Plowden Report of 1967 on primary education, rested heavily on evidence and perspectives drawn from theory. In the second half of the 1960s, theory was riding high.

But with the 1970s has come something of a downswing, and not simply for reasons of cost-cutting or the demoralising closure of colleges. There have been grumbles that in the enthusiasm for theory too much attention has been distracted from practical preparation for the classroom. By 1972, the James Report was already demoting theory in its proposed second cycle of professional preparation. More recently, the schools have been criticised for being too readily wooed by 'theorists', who are apparently envisaged as a band of peripatetic half-wits, too fleet of foot ever actually to be seen. Some politicians, especially some noisy ones on the right, regularly promise to take a hatchet to theory if only we will place political power in their firmly practical hands.

Complaints of these kinds are not wholly new. No doubt they have their corrective place in the general scheme of things. But what is arguably new is a degree of disenchantment with theory amongst some theorists themselves. As early as 1957, Professor D.J. O'Connor had deprecatingly referred to the term 'educational theory' as being no more than a 'courtesy title', but this remark was swept aside in the general mood of rising optimism. (2) By 1975, however, John Wilson could write a whole book raising doubts both about the benefits of theory and, more radically, about whether educational theory actually existed at all in any reputable form. (3) In 1976, Hartnett and Naish, generously granted the space of two volumes by their publishers, remained at the close unconvinced of the relevance of theory. (4) Other theorists, perhaps thinking that professional suicide would be the only honourable course if these doubts were well founded, have turned to commonsense, not so much to exhibit some as to make of it a last remaining object of legitimate study, although no doubt in due course one to be made into something learned and obscure.

So what are we to think of theory? Was its general rise to prominence just a strange and temporary aberration for the sturdily pragmatic British? The teachers themselves commonly regard theory with a varying mixture of respect and suspicion: respect because it is thought of as difficult, and suspicion because its bearings are unclear on the detailed decision as to what to do next Monday morning. But is that suspicion grounded in the right expectations? Detailed practical assistance was never promised in the programmatic outlines of the 1960s. For Richard Peters, what philosophy was to offer was only a gradual change of perspective. (5) Brian Simon bluntly said that 'no claim should be made that the study of history of education directly affects the practice of the teacher in the classroom'. (6) William Taylor added that 'the justification for the inclusion of sociological studies in the course for intending teachers does not rest on any observable link between

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the pursuit of such studies and the improvement of classroom technique or practice'. (7)

One possible explanation of the disenchantment with theory is therefore that it has come to be regarded with inappropriate expectations. In consequence, it is judged to be failing where it could not succeed. Where initial training is concerned, the traditional disfavour of theory might, at least to some extent, be attributed to the natural impatience of beginners to be up and doing in the practical roles for which they have cast themselves. Apparently even doctors in training show some impatience with their early theoretical studies of anatomy, physiology and biochemistry. Indeed, the relation between theory and practice causes puzzlement across a very wide field. How is economics related to running a business, jurisprudence to being a lawyer, theology to faith, ethics to conduct, logic to reasoning, or, for that matter, sociology to being a police inspector? Different subject-matters will no doubt yield somewhat different answers, but not to the extent of precluding some striking parallels between them all.

To cut a long introduction short, it seems timely to look once again at the nature of educational theory and its relations to practice. The problems so raised are problems both for theory and for practice. They are problems for practice if we are trying to decide what sort of theory to teach, how much, in what way, to whom, where and when, or if we are preoccupied with the different sets of answers that might be appropriate in initial by contrast with in-service training. But they are problems for theory if we are concerned more abstractly to enquire into the nature of educational theory itself, or the sense in which it could be expected to be relevant to practice. It is primarily with these theoretical questions that I shall be concerned. Discussing them will involve some boundary-crossing references to many branches of educational studies, but the questions themselves fall largely within the philosophy of education, as being especially concerned with a scrutiny of the forms and interconnections of certain sorts of knowledge.

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What meaning, then, can be attached to the term 'theory' in education? There is more than one answer available. Quite often what is meant is simply an idea that is impractical. Thus someone full of enthusiasm for de-schooling as an idea might suggest using the city as a school, with scant regard for the fact that the weather is quite often cold and wet. As James McClellan laconically remarks, one thing that we can say about school is that it beats standing out in the rain; or

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consider the student who plans a fine lesson on the onion (fine 'in theory' that is), only to find his classroom transformed into a gas chamber within minutes of the children's first inquisitive incisions. This first sense of 'theory' points to the many occasions when we wish to distinguish theoretical from practical possibility, a distinction to which I shall later return.

Again, sometimes what is meant by 'theory' is knowledge that may be admirable as far as it goes, such as propositional knowledge of valid general principles, but the possessor of which is as yet untried in practice. He knows, in a propositional way, such things as that one should start from the known, that one should build on existing interests, that one should avoid relying on extrinsic motivation, or that one should present material as the solution to some problem, but it is uncertain how far he will be capable of the detailed judgement, and the coping with the unpredictable, which the valid 'application' of these principles will bring. Plato's picture of the philosopher who has beheld the Sun, but who at first blunders about when he re-enters the cave of ordinary experience, provides a graphic image of the problems here. Doubtless every profession has in its folklore versions of the story of the teacher full of theoretical knowledge in this sense, and always a graduate, who is tripped by his first encounter with Joe Bloggs in 3C.

Less prejudicial and more fundamental is the distinction between theory and practice which contrasts questions as to what is the case with questions as to what should be done, or factual assertions about how things are with value-judgements bearing on how to act. Thus the theorist Lawrence Kohlberg may tell us how moral development proceeds through a certain invariable sequence, whereas what guides the moral agent is a particular code or set of principles. But should we concur here in the tacit assumption that evaluative or practical judgements are not also statements of what is the case, so perhaps granting at the very start a non-cognitivist theory of ethics? On the other hand, are all of the envisaged factual assertions really to be called 'theoretical'? Is the assertion 'this is a blackboard duster' to be classed as theoretical, as it would have to be on the suggested ground of distinction?

What is already clear, I think, is that the distinction between theory and practice is not just one distinction but a shifting set of contrasts made to serve different, although possibly equally valid, purposes. Just as we use the term 'belief' sometimes to include and sometimes to exclude knowledge, so may theory sometimes cover everyday assertions of commonsense but at other times contrast with commonsense a more abstract and systematised understanding. Factual surveys

and reports, such as the recent report of the inspectorate 'Primary Education in England', fall somewhat indeterminately in this shifting borderline area. For example, is the statement theoretical or practical that 17 per cent of the schools which could stream their 11-year-olds now actually do so?

A classic debate on this topic is that between D.J. O'Connor and Paul Hirst. (8) For O'Connor, science provided the paradigm of theory, which he defined as 'a logically connected set of hypotheses whose main function is to explain their subject matter'. In tough positivist fashion he then saw psychology and sociology as offering the principal hope of some genuine educational theory. But even here he expected most of what is useful to be only commonsense, since we are not strangers to human nature and since teaching is no new endeavour. Even on this limited account, however, something more might be said in favour of theory. By its testing of truth it might transform a commonsense impression into reliable hard fact; by its jargon it might effect a very useful economy of expression for a familiar enough idea, as with the concept of the 'self-fulfilling prophecy'; and all this is quite apart from the fact that what ought to be commonsense is not always so common.

But these points of detail apart, Hirst's much more radical reply to O'Connor was that, in adopting a scientific paradigm, he completely misconceived the nature of educational theory. Better analogies, if justice is to be done, are to be found in such practical but theoretically informed pursuits as engineering, politics and medicine. That is to say, 'theory' must be seen as referring to general practical principles which are justified by reference to their backing in various disciplines. Elaborating on this a little, we may expect that the term 'educational theory' will sometimes refer to principles, sometimes to backing, and sometimes to both. Plato's educational theorising is a good example of the more comprehensive use of the term.

Hirst further adds that the transition from backing to practical principles is never a simple deductive step. No doubt he has in mind here some familiar although not uncontested points about the so-called 'naturalistic fallacy', such as that facts never speak for themselves, or that by themselves facts are without practical force or bearing. A 'practical' theory, as he would prefer to call educational and other such theories, must include values in order to give practical guidance or to have practical relevance.

O'Connor seems to accept the possibility of there being such a class of 'practical theories', but he rejects Hirst's evident assumption that educational theory will be monolithic. The