Theory and practice in initial teacher education: the British context

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'Relating theory to practice' is widely perceived as one of the most fundamental and intractable challenges of initial teacher education.

Introduction.

The argument I lead towards in this paper, however, is that while there is indeed a theory-practice problem, conventional diagnoses and associated solutions, far from solving the problem may well have exacerbated it. I shall argue that we need a more comprehensive diagnosis, basic to which must be an understanding of the assumptions which course structures in teacher education institutions have embodied and an honesty on the part of all of us - teacher educators, teachers and administrators - about the extent to which our own assumptions, attitudes and practices might hinder rather than help our student-teachers to make that vital theory-practice synthesis. I write about the context I know best, that in Britain. I make no comparisons with or extrapolations to the Maltese context: that is for others to do.

Theory and practice

Let us first be clear about the problem we are discussing. As usually perceived in Britain it has several aspects:

1. Students complain that some or much theoretical study, particularly in education theory, is 'irrelevant' to their immediate needs to cope and survive under pressure on teaching practice or in their first post.
2. Serving teachers retrospectively argue that much of the theory they received did not equip them for the actual challenges they faced in school.
3. Students have great difficulty in doing what they are expected to do, namely to 'apply' the theory they receive to practical teaching challenges; or to be more specific, while they may be able to apply theory to the intellectual *analysis* of teaching, they can less readily apply it to the *solution* of practical problems.

4. Recent research on experienced teachers at work in classrooms shows them operating successfully on the basis of conceptual framework, a 'craft knowledge', a way of thinking about practice, quite unlike that propounded in the training institutions.[1] This 'practitioner's theory' (for it is indeed a theory and needs to be recognised as such) is idiosyncratic, commonsense, intuitive, eclectic, pragmatic, situation-specific, and very difficult to pin down and generalise about; whereas the essence of traditional education theory is that it is highly explicit, generalised, rational, systematic (discipline-based) and academic. So that *what we have is not merely a theory/practice problem but a theory/theory one: academic theory on the one hand, practitioner theory on the other.*

These are the problems to which teacher educators have vigorously addressed themselves during the past two decades.

In recent course developments, the earlier eclectic mixture of psychology, 'great educators' and classroom prescription, which was seen to fulfil the need for a *professional* theory, has been superceded by the more demanding educational studies of the 1960s and 1970s, in response to *academic* requirements. The emerging disciplines of education rapidly acquired an independent momentum as academic studies in their own right. Segregated from the so-called 'professional' components in initial teacher education they indeed met existing criteria of 'degreeworthiness' central to university validation; but at the same time the theory-practice gulf became more pronounced. Some of the devices which were introduced to ameliorate this 'theory-practice' problem, as it was perceived included: the integration of the education disciplines round professional themes; the blurring of boundaries between educational and professional studies; the application of theoretical constructs in school-based activity. Yet the theory practice problem persisted. Why should this be so?

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Two sorts of causes suggest themselves. One is that the various solutions have been inappropriate. The other is that the 'problem' itself has been incorrectly defined in the first place: a perfectly feasible diagnosis, since the 'theory-practice problem' is itself only another theoretical construct.

The dominant view of theory during this period has been of its constituting a set of propositions about children, teachers, educational processes and contexts. Such propositions are validated by (i) the methodology of the social sciences, particularly the positivistic tradition within that methodological spectrum; (ii) their origin, predominantly, in the institutions which define themselves, and are publicly defined, as existing to create and disseminate such propositional knowledge. This view, tacitly more often than overtly, has informed much debate about the 'theory-practice problem' in teacher education. The theory was 'given', so the 'problem' was to find ways of making its 'relevance' to students' and teachers' practice understood by them. The implicit analogy, as Jonathan pointed out,[2] was with those professional activities whose theory is firmly grounded in the physical sciences - medicine and engineering for example - where previous empirical study would be expected to provide the formulae for the solution of subsequent practical challenges. But the view of teaching as an applied science is scarcely tenable, partly because of the infinite complexity, variability and physical science) of the social sciences, partly because ofthe infinite complexity, variability and unpredictability of human minds and interactions (by comparison with, say, concrete or metal structures), and partly because of the value-dimension which pervades all educational action.

Yet despite this, generations of students were encouraged to use as the ultimate criterion of validity for educational propositions not their own or serving teachers' observations and experience - often dismissed as 'mere' 'intuition', 'commonsense' or 'subjectivity' - but the apparently incontro-vertible 'research has proved that...' This oracular authority they were encouraged to extend to anyone whose views on educational matters had appeared in print - a field which ranged from writers offering profound insight as the result of sustained intellectual effort to the entrepreneurial authors and editors of moneyspinning textbooks and readers.

Educational studies and professional theory, then, were treated as synonymous. The 'problem' was not *whether* the former were appropriate to the needs of the intending teacher, *but how to demonstrate* that they were.

By the early 1970s, however, the givenness of 'theory' so defined was being questioned:

> 'The job of theory is to evoke judgment rather than rote obedience. The application of theory to practice is the bringing to bear of critical intelligence upon practical tasks rather than the implementation of good advice.'[3]

Others pointed out that serving teachers could not, or did not, to any fundamental extent 'apply' such theory to the solution of everyday professional tasks. Coming from serving teachers (as much objections had for years) that view was seen if anything as an argument for increasing the theoretical content of courses. But coming from a university researcher (McNamara) going back into the classroom the argument could not be that readily dismissed. As he somewhat irreverently pointed out:

> 'Developments in glue technology have had a greater impact upon the primary scene than developments in classroom research'[4]

And as Dunlop argued, after an analysis of 1970s articles on the theory practice issue:

> 'These papers show a growing consensus that the 'disciplines' approach to education theory... is unsatisfactory, and a realisation that the criterion of 'relevance' is not just the 'problem-centred' nature of theory but the question of whether it actually does help the teacher to understand his stituation.'[5]

By the late 1970s, therefore, solutions more fundamental than 'integration' were being explored The first was an attempt to generate a new professional theory grounded in the close analysis of classroom practice, which by then had become a significant strand in educational research. But

Hirst and McIntyre were among those who argued that this aspiration was doomed to failure: 'There is not, and cannot be, any systematic corpus of theoretical knowledge from which prescriptive principles for teaching can be generated'. Hirst's alternative was eclecticism - 'raiding the disciplines' as he termed it - in pursuit of whatever insights were available.[6]

A rather different line of enquiry stemmed from the acknowledgement - somewhat belated one might suggest - that since some of the most successful professional practice is not apparently informed to any significant extent by academic education theory (though it is a moot point whether such theory has been assimilated and is informing practice in ways that teachers may be unable to explain), the task was to explore the ideas which teachers actually draw on rather than seek ways of making them 'apply' ideas they self-evidently can do without. McNamara and Desforges attempted to codify the 'craft knowledge' of serving teachers in order to use it as a basis for initial training. Such codification was not successful: *the explication of the thinking behind professional practice at a deeper level than the standard familiar tips was something teachers found difficult.*[7]

However, all the 'solutions' to the 'theory-practice problem' reported so far depended in essence on the replacement of one sort of 'given' theory by another: 'undifferentiated mush' by the disciplines of education; the disciplines by themes; disciplines and themes by a new 'grand theory' derived from empirical classroom studies; or constructed by 'raiding the disciplines', all these by a 'practical theory' created from the codification of teacher craft knowledge. In each case, however more or less relevant each might seem, the problem of actually *using* the theory as a basis for classroom action remained, since all offered 'recipe knowledge' at one stage removed from the particular way each student or teacher conceptualised his task.

This realisation prompted others to argue that the task for teacher educators was to concentrate *less on what the student should know, more on how he might think.* The core of this furt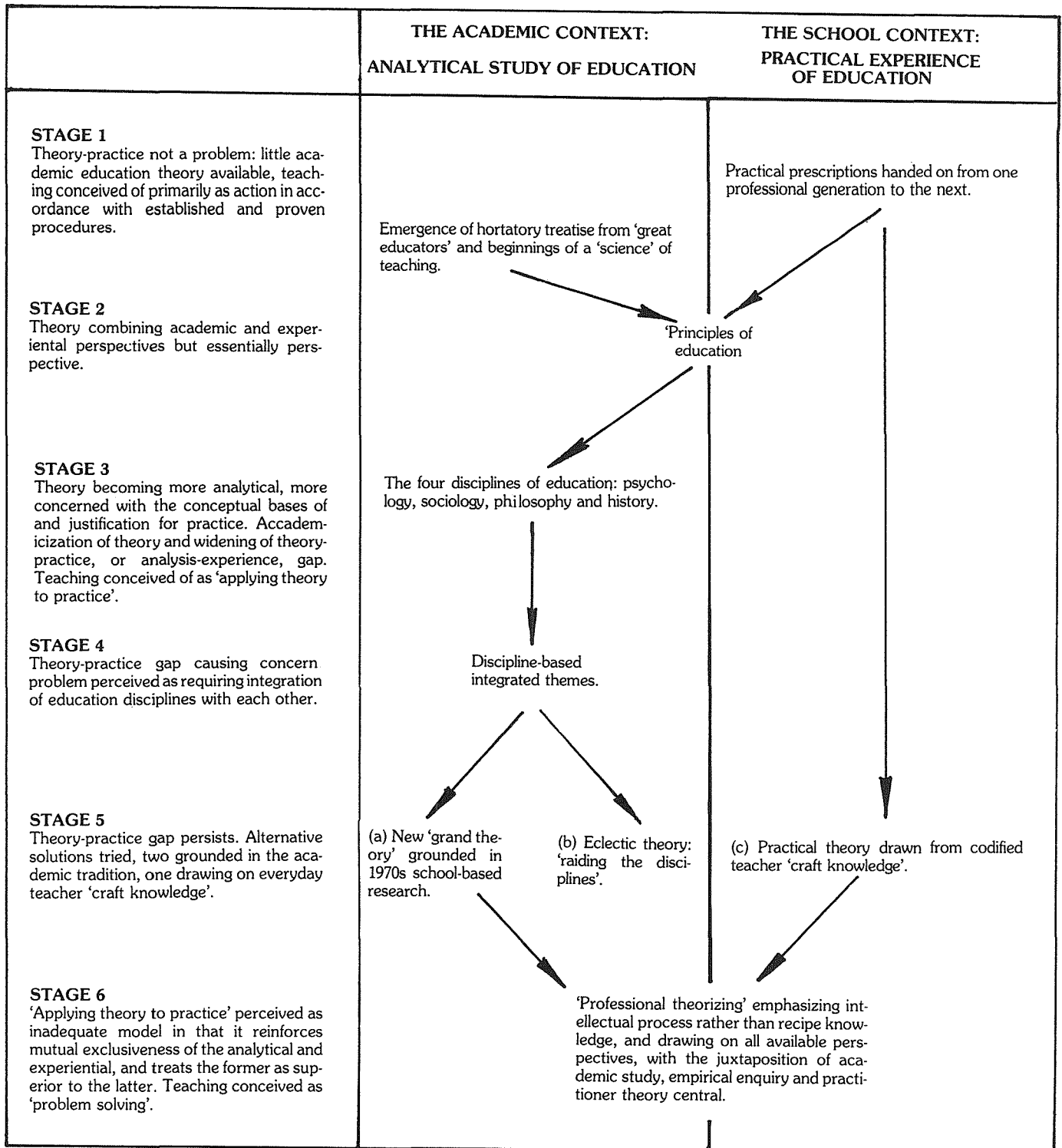her alternative was a notion of theory as intellectual process rather than as propositional knowledge: 'theorizing' or what Reid termed 'deliberation.'[8] But to achieve this demanded a shift, as McIntyre pointed out, from the competitive, individualistic and content-heavy approach intrinsic to mainstream British higher education towards a more communal, interactive style.

'The core of teacher education should involve students' gradual introduction to effective and detailed debate between practising teachers and those engaged in research on teaching from various perspectives.'[9]

McIntyre's analysis was grounded in a Popperian view of educational research, which contrasted with the explicit (or more often tacit and unrecognised) positivism underpinning the mainstream teacher education view of theory/practice. He argued that learning to teach must be a continual process of hypothesis-testing framed by detailed analysis of the values and practical constraints fundamental to teaching. The 'theory' for teacher education should therefore incorporate (i) speculative theory (ii) the findings of empirical research (iii) the craft knowledge of practising teachers, but non should be presented as having prescriptive implications for practice: instead, students should be encouraged to approach their own practice with the intention of testing hypothetical principles drawn from the consideration of these different types of knowledge. To aid this process *researchers would need to shift their emphasis to practitioners' concerns which would be identified on the basis of dialogue, participant observation and action research.*

We can now represent diagrammatically these developments, showing how the initiative for defining professional theory shifted from teachers to academics but could well now be moving back to what, arguably, is the ideal position: one which combines direct experiential analysis with more distanced objective critique, which incorporates both the academic and the experiential.

STAGES IN THE EVOLUTION OF A THEORY FOR TEACHING

	THE ACADEMIC CONTEXT: ANALYTICAL STUDY OF EDUCATION	THE SCHOOL CONTEXT: PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE OF EDUCATION
STAGE 1 Theory-practice not a problem: little academic education theory available, teaching conceived of primarily as action in accordance with established and proven procedures.	Emergence of hortatory treatise from 'great educators' and beginnings of a 'science' of teaching.	Practical prescriptions handed on from one professional generation to the next.
STAGE 2 Theory combining academic and experiental perspectives but essentially perspective.	'Principles of education	
STAGE 3 Theory becoming more analytical, more concerned with the conceptual bases of and justification for practice. Accademicization of theory and widening of theory-practice, or analysis-experience, gap. Teaching conceived of as 'applying theory to practice'.	The four disciplines of education: psychology, sociology, philosophy and history.	
STAGE 4 Theory-practice gap causing concern problem perceived as requiring integration of education disciplines with each other.	Discipline-based integrated themes.	
STAGE 5 Theory-practice gap persists. Alternative solutions tried, two grounded in the academic tradition, one drawing on everyday teacher 'craft knowledge'.	(a) New 'grand theory' grounded in 1970s school-based research. (b) Eclectic theory: 'raiding the disciplines'.	(c) Practical theory drawn from codified teacher 'craft knowledge'.
STAGE 6 'Applying theory to practice' perceived as inadequate model in that it reinforces mutual exclusiveness of the analytical and experiential, and treats the former as superior to the latter. Teaching conceived as 'problem solving'.	'Professional theorizing' emphasizing intellectual process rather than recipe knowledge, and drawing on all available perspectives, with the juxtaposition of academic study, empirical enquiry and practitioner theory central.	

At the moment Stage 6 lies ahead, or at least is more evident in individual practice than in institutional policy, but, overall, the British teacher education scene is characterised by diversity on this matter. Some courses illustrate Stage 3, many have moved to Stage 4, some are experimenting at Stage 5.

*The 'theory practice problem' persists because we have not analysed it adequately.*We have been too ready to take as given a particular definition of theory - the academic study of education through the disciplines of psychology, sociology, philosophy and history - and to then move on to seeing the problem as one of demonstrating the 'relevance' of this particular brand of theory, of helping the student to 'apply' this in the classroom. This has tended to lead us to ignore the existence of other sorts of professional theory, for example, the everyday 'theory in practice' which experienced teachers use; for I am not arguing against theory - far from it: teaching is intensely theoretical, it is based all the time on assumptions and values about children, learning, the purposes of education, the relationship between the individual in society, the nature of knowledge and its evolution in a context of social change, and so on. It is *the theory which we need to understand more about, for in the end this is the theory which has most impact on the children in our schools: the theory their teachers actually use as a basis for classroom decisions, rather than the theory we would like them to use.* The more we try and make the one sort of theory, academic education theory, 'relevant', the more we are in danger of doing precisely the opposite of what we intend, namely not unifying theory and practice but driving a wedge between them or rather between academic theory and everyday theory. If we are serious about our concern to solve this problem we simply cannot leave the actual theorising of teachers out of the equation. Our task has to be to help the student to theorise for himself, for he will have to do that as a teacher, using such pre-existing theory as is available and best meets his needs, comparing it, contrasting it, using one as a basis for critique of another, exploring all sorts of conceptual possibilities, understanding that good teaching requires intellectual effort and the free exercise of the imagination as well as basic practical competence. We need a *dialectical* approach to professional theory, not a *recipe knowledge* approach. In such an approach academic education theory, research and everyday practitioner theory are all necessary. Without any one of these the theorising capacity of the student-teacher and the potential for educational progress in schools are diminished.

Such an approach demands as much from the teaching profession as it does from the teacher trainers. It demands in the first instance an acceptance both that teaching is ipso facto; 'theory-soaked' and that it requires in addition a conscious theorising effort. It demands an acknowledgement that academic theory and research have made and will continue to make vital contributions to educational progress and that the anti-intellectualist stance ('forget all that theory and get on with practical business of teaching') does no credit to a profession which is supposed to be concerned to foster the intellectual qualities of others. And it demands a preparedness in the teaching profession to take a responsible share in the education and training of its future members.

So for our alternative analysis of the theory-practice problem I would suggest that we see it as having not *one* but *six* aspects, as follows:

1. **Intellectual.** The theory-practice problem requires intellectual effort. It requires us to accept it as an intellectual challenge, not to be contended with handed-down ways of thinking about it. And it demands that we accept a view of the teachers task as intellectually as well as practically demanding.

2. **Conceptual/Epistemological.** Our intellectual effort must go into probing the existing concepts of 'theory', 'practice' and 'the theory/practice relationship'. And perhaps into trying to break away from obsession with this issue altogether, into a different way of asking the questions: What sort of intellectual capacities does the intending teacher need? What sort of professional knowledge? What sort of executive skills? What kinds of knowledge and understanding does the good teacher use? How can we tap these in initial training?.

3. **Attitudinal.** We need to look carefully at the attitudes to and assumptions about teacher training institutions and staff held by teachers in schools. If these conflict, why is this? If there is an element of mutual suspicion, why is this? What can be done to resolve it? How can we work towards a greater unity of attitude towards the task of teacher training? For there is no doubt that an attitudinal gap, where it exists, simply reinforces conceptual gaps between theory and practice, and especially there is no doubt that a lack of attitudinal unity between teachers and trainers is against the best interest of the student.

4. **Structural.** *The theory-practice problem has persisted in part because of the persistence of*

deep structural divisions within teacher training courses, which go back in some cases to the nineteenth century and a wholly different concept of education; between academic or main subject studies and professional studies; between so-called 'personal' and 'professional' education; between education theory courses and curriculum or professional courses; between all these and teaching practice and other work in schools. How can we reduce such structural divisions? How can we ensure that the messages conveyed by different parts of a course are consistent and complementary, rather than contradictory?

5. **Pedagogical.** The student's knowledge and understanding of teaching, his way of thinking about, approaching and solving practical classroom challenges, depend as much on everyday pedagogical relationships between himself and his tutors and the teachers in practice schools as upon larger course structures. Or, aphoristically, as much on *how* he is taught as *what* he is taught. We need to examine afresh the pedagogy not only of schools, but of teacher education itself. What kind of learning does it produce? Are the teaching methods and tutor-student relationships in the training institution consistent with whatever view of 'good professional practice' we want the student to acquire? Are they the best examplars of such good practice that we can offer?

6. **Institutional.** Course structures reflect institutional divisions and staff allegiances to different academic traditions which they may have a vestd interest, for career reasons, in seeking to preserve. Are such divisions within the training institutions working *for* the student's capacity to develop professional understanding and skill, or *against* it? And what of the greatest institutional contribution to the theory-practice problem, the gulf between training institutions and schools? The two sorts of institution are financially and administratively separate, they have different career structures, in Britain staff are as yet rarely exchanged between them, and above all they may seem to represent to the student two distinct and sometimes conflicting ways of thinking about and preparing for teaching: one needed in order to pass examinations, the other needed to survive on teaching practice; each liable to be criticised by proponents of the other. At worst the relationship is one of mutual undermining rather than mutual reinforcement.

Thus, although I have argued that the theory-practice problem is intellectual, conceptual, attitudinal, structural and pedagogical, the best point of impact for achieving change at these levels would seem to be institutional roles and relationships. For this reason I would see potential in attempts, such as are emerging in Britain, to blur boundaries between training institutions and schools, between trainers and teachers, and between initial and in-service training.

'Theory-practice' as conceptual dichotomy is hard to resolve, but as institutional practice it is avoidable.

1. E.g. (i) McNamara, D., Desforges, C. (1978) 'The social sciences, teacher education and the objectification of craft knowledge' *British Journal of Teacher Education* 4:1
    (ii) King, R. (1978) *All things bright and beautiful? A sociological study of infants' classrooms.* Wiley
2. Jonathan, R. (1981) 'Empirical research and educational theory'. In Simon, B., Wilcocks, J. (ed.) *Research and practice in the primary classroom.* Routledge.
3. Naish, M., Hartnett, A. (1975) 'What theory cannot do for teachers'. *Education for Teaching,* 96.
4. McNamara, D. (1976) 'On returning to the chalk-face' *British Journal of Teacher Education.* 2:2

5. Dunlop, F. (1977) 'What sort of theory should we have?' *Journal of Further and Higher Education,* 1:1
6. Hirst, P. (1979) 'Professional studies in initial teacher education: some conceptual issues'. In Alexander and Wormald *Op.cit.*
7. McNamara and Desforges (1978) *Op.cit.*
8. Reid, W.A. (1978) *Thinking about the curriculum: the nature and treatment of curriculum problems.* Routledge.
9. McIntyre, D. (1980) 'The contribution of research to quality in teacher education' In Hoyle, E., Megarry, J. (ed.) *Professional Development of Teachers: World Yearbook of Education.* Kogan-Page.