

**RESEARCHING PROFESSIONAL EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE:  
THE CASE FOR “DIRTY THEORY”**

ABSTRACT: In this paper, I argue that a research process involving generalising from professional educational practice can and should inform the work of educators, including academic researchers, policy-makers and practitioners, but that these generalisations need to be derived from, and in dialogue with, the complexity and specificity of actual practice, the myriad ways such practice might be understood, and a conception of practice as historically-informed. In making this case, the paper draws upon social theorist Raewyn Connell’s concept of “dirty theory,” and uses an example of teacher professional learning in a rural community in south-east Queensland, Australia, to show how Connell’s notion of dirty theory might be applied to research professional educational practice. I argue that historically-informed, context aware, and epistemologically-sensitive generalisations then become available as resources for informing the work of researchers, policy-makers and practitioners. I conclude with examples of such generalisations as evidence of the potential of Connell’s theory.

**INTRODUCTION**

How educators theorise research into professional educational practice to help inform policy, research and practice is heavily contested terrain. In an effort to challenge more hegemonic, scientific conceptions of research into practice, more critical philosophical and theoretical traditions in educational research foreground context-responsive approaches to professional educational practice, and adopt a

cautious approach to more general theorising. This is entirely understandable, given the increasing emphasis upon more reductionist, “scientific” approaches, which seek to deliver general “solutions” which can then be applied regardless of context. Under such circumstances, efforts to conceptualise educational research differently, to “re-imagine”<sup>1</sup> educational research, are essential. However, and at the same time, this paper argues that educational research involving a form of general theory development should not be overlooked, and is a useful and important resource for informing professional educational practice, and research into such practice.

The article begins with a brief overview of key educational theorists and philosophers’ efforts to conceptualise professional educational practice, and research into practice, as a precursor to arguing that attempts to generalise from practice are important and useful for informing practice and research into practice. These generalisations need to be developed as part of a simultaneous process of ongoing, historically-informed engagement with actual data/specific instances of professional practice, taking into account practitioners’ conceptions of practice. In making this case, the paper draws upon social theorist Raewyn Connell’s concept of “dirty theory,” theory which: seeks to generalise but always in light of the specificity of practice; avoids privileging existing dominant conceptions of practice; is in active dialogue with more marginalised local epistemologies, and; takes the history of current practices into account. Such theory is a useful resource to ensure a necessary and robust reflexivity on the part of all educators-as-researchers. The paper employs an example of a specific instance of teacher professional learning in a small rural community in south-east Queensland, Australia, to exemplify how such “dirty”

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Smith, “Proteus Rising: Re-Imagining Educational Research,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 42, no. S1 (2008): 183-198.

theorising might be employed to develop theoretical resources to critique and inform professional educational practice and research into such practice.

From the outset, it should be noted that while the argument presented draws heavily upon a body of literature by established theorists, philosophers and researchers, typically located within the academy, and the extended example is analysed by a researcher who is also similarly located, the position presented should not be construed as precluding practitioners-as-researchers from employing these same concepts to interrogate their own practice. That is, practitioners can and should be encouraged to employ these same tools to research and theorise *their* practice, so as to inform their practice, and their theories of practice. This is similarly the case for educational policy-makers. Such a stance is in keeping with Biesta's<sup>2</sup> call for a more democratic conception of research practice.

## **CONCEPTUALISING AND RESEARCHING PROFESSIONAL EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE**

There is a long history of efforts to make sense of professional educational practice, and research into such practice. A brief overview of the work of some of the most significant approaches reveals how key philosophers, theorists and researchers of professional educational practice have conceptualised such practice, and research into professional educational practice, over time.

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<sup>2</sup> Gert Biesta, "Why What Works Won't Work: Evidence-Based Practice and the Democratic Deficit in Educational Research," *Educational Theory* 57, no. 1 (2007):1-22.

In his 1904 contribution to *The Third Yearbook of the National Society for the Scientific Study of Education, Part I*, “The Relation of Theory to Practice in Education,”<sup>3</sup> John Dewey’s efforts to conceptualise professional education in the context of teacher education led to the identification of tensions between what he described as the “apprenticeship” model to inquiry, and the more theoretically-informed, “laboratory” model. This was apparent in the contrasting ways in which Dewey referred to how to adequately prepare teachers for the work they would undertake throughout their careers:

On one hand, we may carry on the practical work with the object of giving teachers in training working command of the necessary tools of their profession; control of the technique of class instruction and management; skill and proficiency in the work of teaching. With this aim in view, practice work, is as far as it goes, of the nature of apprenticeship. On the other hand, we may propose to use practice work as an instrument in making real and vital theoretical instruction; the knowledge of subject-matter and of principles of education. This is the laboratory point of view.<sup>4</sup>

Dewey went on to outline an elaborate progression and approach to teacher education involving the consideration of theory in the actual practice of teaching. A deep knowledge of psychological and theoretical concepts, as part of any “practical experience,” was seen as the best means of encouraging a more thoughtful practitioner.

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<sup>3</sup> John Dewey, “The Relation of Theory to Practice in Education,” in *The Third Yearbook of the National Society for the Scientific Study of Education, Part I: The Relation of Theory to Practice in the Education of Teachers*, ed. Charles McMurry (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1904): 9-30.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

While Dewey was writing at a time when education was only just beginning to be recognised as a distinct and substantive body of knowledge in its own right, over subsequent decades, professional education more generally was seen as increasingly important. Lynn's introduction to the 1963 special issue of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences journal, *Daedalus*, devoted to the professions, proclaimed the success of professional practice: "Everywhere in American life, the professions are triumphant."<sup>5</sup> The conception of professional education seen as effecting this success involved identification of a body of knowledge which was then put into practice; subsequent action was "determined by esoteric knowledge systematically formulated and applied to problems of a client."<sup>6</sup> Effective practice was seen to "rest upon some branch of knowledge to which the professionals are privy by virtue of long study and by initiation and apprenticeship under masters already members of the profession."<sup>7</sup> A linear relationship between theory and practice seemed evident, dominated by a conception of practice as dependent upon more general theorising and research already undertaken into practice, and made available to members of their profession as part of their initial and continuing training.

A decade later, Edgar Schein argued the application of new knowledge and technology in professional education would address significant societal problems. However, already, the challenges confronting professional education were clearly evident. Increased specialisation, technologisation, lack of coordination, bureaucratisation and standardisation were all seen as contributing to problematic outcomes. More detailed consideration of the nature and effects of professional

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<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Lynn, "Introduction to the Issue: The Professions," *Daedalus* 92, no. 4 (1963), 649.

<sup>6</sup> Everett Hughes, "The Professions," *Daedalus* 92, no. 4 (1963), 655.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 656.

educational practice were considered necessary. In speaking about education in professional schools in colleges and universities, Schein argued against standardisation, and in favour of a process of ongoing inquiry into the educational practices within such schools: "... the school should deliberately avoid the search for standardized solutions to curriculum questions, engaging instead in a perpetual process of self-diagnosis and research on the outcomes of its educational efforts."<sup>8</sup> A more active approach to research on the part of professionals was construed as increasingly important for informing their practice.

Donald Schön's critique of professional educational practice in the face of the seeming institutionalised failure of professionals to fulfil their responsibilities to their constituencies led to more explicit calls for sustained inquiry into actual practice. Schön's<sup>9</sup> passionate advocacy for a more "reflective practitioner" was in stark contrast to the "technical rationality" and reasoning which he argued characterised the dominant epistemology of practice, and which guided the decision-making of professionals. The "solution", according to Schön was a new epistemology of learning, what he described as "a kind of action research, with norms of its own, which will conflict with the norms of technical rationality."<sup>10</sup>

Reflecting this emphasis upon learning-in-action, Michael Eraut's efforts to make sense of professional educational practice entailed the appropriation of a body of knowledge to then be utilised in specific settings and circumstances.<sup>11</sup> Eraut

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>9</sup> Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

<sup>10</sup> Donald Schön, "Knowing in Action: The New Scholarship Requires a New Epistemology," *Change* 27, no. 6, (1995) 27.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Eraut, *Developing Professional Knowledge and Competence* (London: Falmer, 1994).

pointed to a theory-practice binary in his critique of the tendency to front-load initial education programs for professionals, and in the dilemmas of how best to incorporate knowledge in practice. While outlining different kinds of knowledge, and different modes of knowledge use, for Eraut, professional knowledge was construed as something which professionals made sense of as part of a process of research-in-context.

For later commentators, such as Shulman,<sup>12</sup> who focused specifically upon teachers' practices<sup>13</sup>, professional education involved identifying what teachers should know and be able to do. Such an approach initially emphasised individual conceptions of "knowing." Such learning involved individual understanding of content knowledge, general pedagogic knowledge, curriculum knowledge, knowledge of learners, knowledge of educational contexts, and pedagogical content knowledge. In later work, Shulman<sup>14</sup> placed much more emphasis upon how teachers developed knowledge in specific communities and contexts. That is, the interplay between the individual and the social was given considerably more emphasis than in his earlier work.

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<sup>12</sup> Lee Shulman, "Knowledge and Teaching: Foundations of the New Reform," *Harvard Educational Review* 57, no.1 (1987): 1-22.

<sup>13</sup> In the context of teaching, teaching practitioners (and some researchers of teaching practice) may refer to "practices" rather than "practice." Relatedly, in clarifying different meanings of the term "practice" in the context of teaching, McLaughlin argues it is possible to identify "a rough distinction between conceptions of 'practice' which specify a coherent, overall, holistic vision of teaching, on the one hand, and conceptions of 'practice' which include, on the other hand, activities which constitute lower level, specific and subordinate elements of teaching detachable from such a vision." (See Terence McLaughlin, "Teaching as a Practice and a Community of Practice: The Limits of Commonality and the Demands of Diversity," in *Education and Practice: Upholding the Integrity of Teaching and Learning*, ed. Joseph Dunne and Pádraig Hogan (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 54). In this paper, the term 'practice' is used in ways more akin to McLaughlin's holistic meaning of the term. The term 'practices' is generally employed to refer to the plural of this more holistic meaning, although it is also employed (particularly in the example in the latter half of the paper) to refer to the specific activities which constitute a broader teaching practice. Although not explicit, this more flexible application of the terms 'practice' and 'practices' is also evident in Shulman's work.

<sup>14</sup> Lee Shulman & J Shulman, "How and What Teachers Learn: A Shifting Perspective," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 36, no. 2 (2004): 257-271.

More recently, in the introductory chapter to his 2010 edited volume *Elaborating Professionalism: Studies in Practice and Theory*, Kanes<sup>15</sup> uses the example of the 2008 global financial crisis to argue the need to challenge forms of education which have led to problematic practices, such as that evinced by various banking and financial figures. Kanes argues this crisis has highlighted not only the uncertainty surrounding what can be expected of professionals and public trust, but also the extent to which education programs for the professions are adequate to the task. A much more context-responsive, or what Kanes describes as “more contextually-informed” and shared sense of professionalism,”<sup>16</sup> is advocated.

In his contribution to Kanes’ volume, and continuing the focus upon context, Kemmis<sup>17</sup> argues that educational practice as a form of professional practice can be better understood through research which overtly considers the range of “extra-individual” features which influence any form of practice. Kemmis categorises these extra-individual features of practice – described variously as “mediating preconditions” and “practice architectures”<sup>18</sup> – in terms of cultural discursive arrangements (which shape and structure practice through language and other forms of communication), social arrangements (which shape and structure practice through power relations within social settings) and material-economic arrangements (which shape and structure practice through work and general means of production).

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<sup>15</sup> Clive Kanes, “Challenging Professionalism,” in *Elaborating Professionalism: Studies in Practice and Theory*, ed. Clive Kanes (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010):1-16.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Kemmis, “What is Professional Practice? Recognizing and Respecting Diversity in Understandings of Practice” in *Elaborating Professionalism: Studies in Practice and Theory*, ed. Clive Kanes (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010): 139-165.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Kemmis and Peter Grootenboer, “Situating Praxis in Practice: Practice Architectures and the Cultural, Social and Material Conditions for Practice,” in *Enabling Praxis: Challenges for Education*, eds. Stephen Kemmis and Tracey Smith (Rotterdam: Sense, 2008): 37-62.

Similarly, Schatzki<sup>19</sup>, a more general philosopher of practice upon whom Kemmis<sup>20</sup> draws in part, argues practices are not simply the product of individual action and reflection, but are “prefigured” by the way in which the world is always-already organised. Professional practice does not reside within the individual, but is instead evident under specific social conditions. Research into such practice needs to be cognisant of these broader conditions.

Kemmis<sup>21</sup> also seeks to emphasise practice as not only a social entity, but one which should be oriented towards social change. Kemmis<sup>22</sup> draws upon the neo-Aristotelian tradition of practical philosophy to put forward a case for educational practice as *praxis*, that is, as morally informed and committed action informed by traditions within a field – in this case, the field of education. This work builds out of earlier advocacy for educational action research and its variants, construed as an active process of engagement amongst participants working together in a specific context, and seeking to improve the rationality of their work together, and in the interests of emancipation from injustice, irrationality and error.<sup>23</sup>

In his quest to “re-imagine educational research” in a world-view beyond more dominant, modernist epistemological traditions, Richard Smith,<sup>24</sup> argues any research into education must grapple with the complexity and messiness of actual

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<sup>19</sup> Theodore Schatzki, *The Site of the Social: A Philosophical Account of the Constitution of Social Life and Change* (University Park, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Kemmis, “What is Professional Practice?”; Kemmis and Grootenboer, “Situating Praxis in Practice.”

<sup>21</sup> Kemmis, “What is Professional Practice?”

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.; Stephen Kemmis and Tracey Smith, “Conclusions and Challenges: Enabling Praxis,” eds. Stephen Kemmis and Tracey Smith *Enabling Praxis: Challenges for Education* (Amsterdam: Sense Publishers, 2008):263-286.

<sup>23</sup> Wilfred Carr and Stephen Kemmis, *Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge and Action Research*. (London: Falmer, 1986); Wilfred Carr and Stephen Kemmis, “Staying Critical,” *Educational Action Research* 13, no. 3 (2006): 347-358.

<sup>24</sup> Smith, “Proteus Rising.”

practice, acknowledge the inherently constructed nature of social scientific research, and advance a position which is not fixated on a singular conception of “knowingness.” Green<sup>25</sup> is similarly interested in the way in which understandings of practice may be conceptualised as constructed, arguing any understandings of professional educational practice arising from theoretical and/or empirical inquiry need to be cognisant of this complexity. However, Green also goes one step further, arguing that these theoretical attempts to make sense of practice can serve as tools and resources which may also “enable” actual practices themselves. Consequently, various efforts to represent practice, or “representations,” can be seen as an integral part of practices, rather than being construed as “knowledge” which somehow exists apart from, or which is seen as superior to, actual practice.

### **THE CASE FOR “DIRTY THEORY”**

While individually and collectively useful, these articulations of professional educational practice may be fruitfully augmented by an approach to researching social practice which not only remains cognisant of the context-specific nature of practice – a key theme of many of these theorists and researchers’ efforts to conceptualise and research practice (albeit from varying epistemological standpoints) – but also explicitly values efforts to generalise from particular instances of practice. Such generalisations should simultaneously acknowledge the epistemological standpoint from which this work is undertaken, engage with issues as perceived locally, and acknowledge the place of history in influencing current practices. Such themes may be individually evident within some current and earlier efforts to research and theorise

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<sup>25</sup> Bill Green, “The Primacy of Practice and the Problem of Representation,” in *Understanding and Researching Professional Practice*, ed. Bill Green (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009): 39-54.

professional educational practice, but few seek to work across these multiple perspectives simultaneously. It is these efforts to engage with the specificity of practice, but without relinquishing potential insights arising from efforts to generalise from practice, to which this paper seeks to contribute.

Such an approach helps to avoid glossing over the messiness, specificity and complexity of actual practice, while also working to develop more general understandings which are simultaneously informed by a history of events associated with any given practice. In an effort to acknowledge the peculiarity of actual practice, to be more reflexive in efforts to conceptualise practice, as well as to develop more general, historically-infused knowledge to inform practice and research into practice, this paper draws upon recent work by sociologist Raewyn Connell.<sup>26</sup> Connell argues in favour of bringing to bear locally generated data (“actual” practice) and theoretical constructs (“understandings” of practice), *in situ*, and to do so in a way which acknowledges past practices and multiple ways of “knowing.”

In *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science*,<sup>27</sup> Connell reflects upon the hegemonic role of theories generated in northern metropolitan centres, and the way in which such theorising disenfranchises and dominates attempts to develop alternative epistemologies more sensitive to the lived conditions of those beyond the metropole, or what she describes as “Southern theory.” Critiquing the work of theorists such as James Coleman, Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu, Connell argues that the “northernness of general theory” is evident in what

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<sup>26</sup> Connell, *Southern Theory*.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

she describes as “the claim of universality; reading from the centre; gestures of exclusion; and grand erasure.”<sup>28</sup>

Claims of universality imply that it is possible to “know” any given practice on the basis of generalisations from previous research. What is most important is that the specificity of research not be acknowledged as such, as this would bring claims of application across all contexts into question. The emphasis upon specificity and the local is anathema to more traditional, dominant approaches to researching social practices:

Social science usually prefers context-free generalisation. Special prestige accrues to theory which is so abstracted that its statements seem universally true – the indifference curves of consumption economics, the structural models of Levi-Strauss, the practice models of Bourdieu and Giddens ...<sup>29</sup>

“Reading from the centre” implies framing issues from the perspective of already-identified conceptual issues/problems to be investigated or solved, rather than seriously addressing how issues arising from or relating to more peripheral or marginal locations could be construed differently. How issues are framed in the sites in which they play out are central to better comprehending the nature of those issues. Limiting understandings to already existing or dominant knowledge categories inhibits the potential for alternative perspectives and viewpoints. Relatedly, “gestures of exclusion” involve focusing upon established texts and authorities as interlocutors, rather than those actually enacting a practice, or more marginal authorities. Engaging

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 196.

with alternative sources enables a dialogic encounter which actively seeks to include, respect and acknowledge the perspectives of individuals and groups overtly or covertly ignored in official and already-sanctioned accounts. “Grand erasure” involves theorising from empirical research without accounting for the peculiar histories which invariably inform and influence current practices. Rather than assuming that current practices begin “from scratch, in a blank space,”<sup>30</sup> acknowledgement needs to be given to current practices as having a history over time, in particular places and spaces, and that this history can usefully inform established practices. To ignore this temporal dimension is to inadequately engage with or comprehend current practices. Highly selective accounts which only partially account for prior experiences also fail to adequately address the complexity of lived realities.

As an alternative, Connell mounts an argument in favour of a more historically informed, iterative, epistemologically reflexive, empirically-focused approach to researching and theorising, or what she describes as “dirty theory,” as a vehicle for better understanding and informing actual practices. She does so in the context of challenging a broader global research context in which social theory is typically generated in the geopolitical “North,” often on the basis of data extricated from the “South,” revealing that like so many north-south<sup>31</sup> relations, the process of theory development is also typically an exploitative one. The way around such exploitation is to ensure a sustained focus upon, and genuine engagement with, the specific sites

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>31</sup> For Connell, the “North” refers to the relatively wealthy Anglo-American and Euro-centric countries, typically located in the northern hemisphere, in which theories are often “developed”, while the “South” refers to dominated countries or sites which have often served as places in which data collection occurs for the development of such theories. The result is an imbalance in acknowledgement, understanding and respect for different epistemological stances and positions.

and places in which empirical research is undertaken as sites in which practices are historically informed, and within which knowledge is actively generated.

However, this does not imply that it is impossible or unworthy to generalise from this data. Generalisations can be developed but universal generalisations should be avoided as “only the weak ones are universals.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Connell cautions against a suspicion of generalisation *per se*. She argues against those iterations of postmodernism which construe the local as the only site of intervention and which deny any form of generalisation:

This line of thought is damaging if it leads to a rejection of generalisation – the lifeblood of social science as a cultural formation. Generalisation is involved in communication, in the testing of claims, in scientific imagination and the search for new data, in the application and use of knowledge, in the capacity of knowledge to grow. To reject generalisation in social science would immobilise us. But that does not mean that we are committed to generalise in abstract universals.<sup>33</sup>

For Connell, generalisation and theory development are interwoven research processes, enabling what she describes as “the search for patterns, the critique of data.”<sup>34</sup> Generalisation is an essential part of all aspects of the development of knowledge and understanding which then serve as resources to help inform practice, and further research into practice.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 207.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 225.

To avoid both processes of abstract universalising, and a conception of generalisation as innately problematic, Connell advocates: situating any form of theory development within the specific contexts in which data are collected and developed; theorising which is in genuine dialogue with local rather than remote issues; theorising which accounts for more marginal perspectives, and; which is historically informed. Such a position seeks to draw upon, and develop, theorising relevant to particular situations, and to do so in ways which enable generalisation, but always in light of the historically-informed context in which any form of research and theory development are undertaken: “The power of the social science generalisations is multiplied if they can be linked to the characteristics of the context *within* which they apply.”<sup>35</sup>

This focus on the particular, the specific, is crucial but the learnings derived are not limited to those particular settings. Generalisations can be made on the basis of specific instances of practice. (In parallel with such an argument, Evers and Wu, provide a useful justification for developing generalisations from single cases through “inductive inference” – a process of inferring to the best explanation to explain a particular phenomenon<sup>36</sup>). Such generalisations require a different conception of knowledge from more traditional, abstract-universal approaches:

Theorising grounded in specific landscapes is not trapped in those landscapes.

But it certainly needs another criterion of significance from the criterion that

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 207 (emphasis original).

<sup>36</sup> Colin Evers and Echo Wu, “On Generalising from Single Case Studies: Epistemological Reflections,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 40, no. 4 (2006): 511-526.

abstract-universal theorising has used, where the more cases that are covered the stronger the argument is supposed to be.<sup>37</sup>

This criterion, Connell argues, lies within the relationship between theory and locally generated data. Theory and data need to be recognised as existing in a constant interrogative relationship with one another. The generalisations subsequently produced are significant because they are reflected in the characteristics of the specific locations within which they apply. That is, generalisations are possible but these need to build out of a constant iterative relationship with specific situations, inquiry into the peculiar histories of practices at these sites, the perspectives of those involved in which they are derived, and from the standpoint of local rather than remote issues. This involves a research process characterised not by abstract theory generation, but a constant process of theory development *in situ*. The generalisations produced then become resources for consideration in future research undertaken at original and subsequent sites.

Consequently, dirty theory is:

theorising that is mixed up with specific situations. The goal of dirty theory is not to subsume, but to clarify; not to classify from outside, but to illuminate a situation in its concreteness. And for that purpose – to change the metaphor – all is grist to the mill.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 207.

It is the emphasis upon an historically-informed conception of practice about local issues, and drawing upon the perspectives of those involved, which this paper argues is pivotal to any attempts to develop a conception of professional educational practice which seeks to develop more general knowledge to help inform the work of researchers, policy-makers and practitioners at and beyond these specific sites. Following Connell's lead then, the ideas presented in this paper are an attempt to be true to the call to consider "dirty theory" as a means of engaging more fully with the social world, and understandings of this world – in this case, as they pertain to professional educational practice.

## **THE "FUTURE SCHOOLS CLUSTER" AS A SITE OF PROFESSIONAL EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE**

### **CONTEXTUALISING PROFESSIONAL EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE**

To exemplify how the notion of "dirty theory" might be employed to both better understand and inform research into professional educational practice, the remainder of the paper presents an analysis of a particular instance of such practice in action.

The particular case involves a cross-school group of teachers from four primary schools, one secondary school and an environmental education centre working together to understand and implement curriculum reform in their respective schools in Queensland, Australia, during the early 2000s – a period of substantial reform in education in that state. Research into the teaching, curriculum-development

and assessment practices of teachers in Queensland at this time revealed limited pedagogical quality in public schools in the state, with particularly adverse educational outcomes amongst students in the middle years of schooling (upper elementary/lower secondary).<sup>39</sup> Under these circumstances, the principals from the six school sites serving a local regional community decided it would be beneficial to encourage collaborative curriculum reform, with a particular focus upon education reform in the middle years. As the primary schools served as feeder schools to the secondary school, and prior personal and professional relationships existed between some of the teachers, the principals encouraged a core of teachers from the respective schools to meet together over an eighteen month period to explore how best to facilitate curriculum reform within their respective sites. The reform involved the introduction of a new, project-based curriculum, called the “New Basics”, which was being trialled in several schools across the state, including the secondary school. The group of teachers who met together came to be known as the “Curriculum Board,” and the six schools in the local region from which they were drawn were collectively known as the “Future Schools Cluster.”

While the full research project pertaining to this case drew upon a range of meetings and interviews with members of the Curriculum Board, the research presented here draws on the transcript of a single meeting of members of the group to suggest how Connell’s concept of dirty theory might help inform research into professional educational practice. (The findings of the broader research project have been reported elsewhere in some detail.)<sup>40</sup> The meeting involved select members of the Curriculum Board investigating how the New Basics was being employed in the

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<sup>39</sup> School of Education, University of Queensland, “The Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study” (Brisbane: Education Queensland, 2001).

<sup>40</sup> See Author, 2008; Author & -, 2008; Author, 2010; Author, forthcoming.

secondary school, with a view to informing curriculum renewal in the primary schools, particularly the primary school in which the meeting was being held. As the meeting involved the group seeking to understand the nature of the new curriculum prior to facilitating curriculum reform within their respective schools, the meeting is construed as an instance of professional educational practice for the teachers involved.

## **ENACTING PROFESSIONAL EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE**

The meeting was held at a small rural primary school (with an enrolment of approximately 200 students) and attended by three representatives from this school, one representative from another primary school, and the chair of the Curriculum Board (a teacher at the secondary school). During the meeting, the chair of the Board, “Lisa,”<sup>41</sup> outlined the nature of four projects – described as “rich tasks” in the New Basics framework – which had been designed by teachers at the secondary school. The chair also explained how these tasks related to two official rich tasks mandated by the state public educational authority, Education Queensland. The meeting reveals deliberations between the chair and other teachers about how teachers from the respective schools might engage with the New Basics. While the New Basics was compulsory for the secondary school, teachers in all schools were expected to engage in curriculum renewal as part of the broader reform effort occurring across the state. This included improving the curriculum connections between primary and secondary schools.

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<sup>41</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

At the outset of the meeting, a teacher from one of the primary schools asked for an explanation about what was occurring at the secondary school:

Michael: [Could you provide] an overview, a bit of detail about what each of those four things does [pointing to the school-designed rich tasks to be introduced in the secondary school], and that will give us an idea about what we've got to do.

Lisa: Sure, OK. So "Destination Down Under" – I'm just seeing if I have – for some of them, I have a written plan that you can take a copy of.

At this point, the learning process entailed a question-answer sequence in which a primary teacher questioned a secondary colleague about the nature of several rich task units of work to be implemented as part of the "New Basics" curriculum. This teacher's comments indicated he wanted to know what he had to do, and the way to elicit this information was to ask the chair of the Board for an account of the nature of the rich tasks about to be implemented in the secondary school. The chair's response indicates a willingness to acquiesce to this request.

At the same time, there was also evidence of a more iterative, co-production process of knowledge development about the curriculum reform process. This was evident in teachers' willingness to share information and learn from one another about how the existing curriculum in Year 7 at one of the primary schools related to one of the mandatory tasks to be undertaken with Year 8 students at the high school:

Lisa: So, next year in Year 8, our Year 8s are going to do four school-designed rich tasks and two of the actual rich tasks. They're going to do "International Trade" and "Built Environments."

Michael: So they're not familiar to them?

Lisa: Because they're the "real" Rich Tasks. Like, they're the suite that they must do. They're the mandatory tasks, whereas these four are the ones we've designed as a school. So they'll assist the students to lead in to the other tasks.

Beth: OK, so we need to get a starting point for how the 7s might dovetail into the 8 program.

Lisa: Yeah, so I'll explain some of that a little bit more.

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Michael: Well, that's [International Trade] a fairly big unit in Year 7. I was just going to say: this is the new SOSE<sup>42</sup> syllabus and the whole thing is around Australian industry and exports and global business, so we've just done a big unit on this.

Beth: Good stuff.

Michael: And we're doing a major assignment now on international trade, so they're going to come with a little bit of background already.

Beth: Yeah

At the same time as seeking to "dovetail" with the secondary curriculum, the way in which the primary members of the Curriculum Board sought to understand the new curriculum, and how it related to existing syllabus objectives, also revealed a

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<sup>42</sup> SOSE – Studies of Society and Environment – is the principal social studies curriculum offered to primary and junior secondary school students in Queensland.

willingness to inquire into and reflect upon their work collectively as a vehicle for curriculum renewal.

The nature of the discussion also indicated a significant level of deliberation on the part of teachers as a means of making sense of the new curriculum, and apparent inconsistencies within it, including various “repertoires” – specific knowledge and skill objectives promoted in the curriculum:

Teresa: We were having a discussion the other day when we were putting together that “repertoires” list. And we were actually a little disappointed. And the more you look at these repertoires, the less happy we are with them, because some of them are so discrete. I mean the one that said “Understanding the Earth’s rotation on its axis and the revolution around the sun” –

Beth: Bit subject specific isn’t it?

Lisa: Yeah! Well, some of the others – the more we came across them, there was –

Beth: “Evaluation and Problem Solving” [reading from one of the mandatory rich tasks].

Lisa: Yeah, that’s OK, you know. But then, we were looking, “Focused research and analytical skills” as opposed to “Specialised researching” [reading from rich task sheet] - you tell me what the difference is! One’s in Rich Task 1, and one’s in Rich Task 4, and apart from that, we can’t work out why there would be “Focused research” as opposed to “Specialised researching.”

Beth: I don't know? Is it [a matter of] degree?

Lisa: Yeah – you know there are some [repertoires] that are quite definite: “Apply mathematical techniques and procedures related to measurement, estimation of scale, drawing and costing.” Well, you know, that fits maths, doesn't it?

Beth: Uh huh [in agreement].

Lisa: And there's some that you go, well, that's science, whereas some others are skills that the kids have to do all the time. We thought “Developing and implementing action plans” – isn't that what you do all the time? ...

Cecily: Yeah, that's right.

Beth: So maybe we need to look at the heavy duty skills, which would be already embedded in our [syllabus] outcomes?

Lisa: That's right.

Beth: ... and expressed slightly differently...

Lisa: Ummm [in agreement].

Beth: ... from our sort of stuff.

This extended deliberation reveals efforts by these teachers to inquire into the educational reform agenda in light of existing practices, including in relation to existing discipline areas, and the overall veracity of the reform agenda in terms of student learning.

At the same time, there was also evidence of a desire to secure an endpoint rapidly, and without too much fuss:

Lisa: I don't know where that leaves us for the moment, but my suggestion definitely for your Year 7s next term: "Built Environment" or "International Trade" would be where I'd start my looking or thinking, in terms of repertoires. And whether you want to design something that is quite similar to, that feeds into that, and that the kids could see this immediate connection [with the rich task to be implemented in the secondary school], or whether you just want to look at them [in less detail].

The desire to seek an end-point exerted influence at the same time as a contrary desire to foster understanding and engage more deeply with the concepts and ideas associated with the new curriculum.

There were also instances when critique of the curriculum reform appeared to be influenced by teachers' prior experiences of such work. This was evident in the impassioned way the primary teachers insisted that any curriculum documentation arising from their work within the Curriculum Board needed to be personalised in relation to their schools' needs:

Michael: Beth's just saying it's too "all over the place." There needs to be some sort of structure to get from there to here, in a more specific way, rather than arrows going all over the place [pointing to unit-of-work planning documents].

Lisa: Well, like I said, that's why you could use – you could have a couple of different formats ...

Beth: Well, I mean, we can work with something like that, but you need to personalise it.

The educative work being undertaken seemed to involve drawing upon co-constructed knowledge about the peculiarities of curriculum reform within the cluster, as well as prior experiences, even as there were also efforts to reconcile various tensions, and come up with a new curriculum relatively quickly.

### **“DIRTY THEORY” IN ACTION**

Careful inquiry into the nature of the professional learning practices evident during the meeting of members of the Curriculum Board reveals an historically-contingent set of practices deeply informed by participants’ work with one another and understandings of this work, and in relation to the challenges of promoting educational reform in a specific locality. In seeking to make sense of such professional practice, issues of universality, “reading from the centre,” “gestures of exclusion” and “grand erasure” are all called into question.

While more universal tendencies may encourage some theorists, philosophers and researchers of practice to construe concepts as universally applicable across settings, the interactions of practitioners within the Future Schools Cluster reveal specific practices which are not so readily contained. Rather than conforming to existing conceptions of how practice is “knowable,” teachers’ practices seemed to be simultaneously characterised by a spectrum of specific, complex and conflicting tendencies in response to their circumstances. This was evident, for example, in the

way the same primary teacher who sought immediate answers to the nature of the curriculum the primary teachers should enact was also prepared to engage in a much more dialogic process of actively listening, participating and proffering suggestions about how to improve school curriculum offerings. More sustained consideration of practice occurred in conjunction with efforts to secure more immediate answers to complex questions. Generalisations about this complexity can be made, including about the sporadic, interactive nature of teachers' associations, cognisant of the richness and variety which characterise actual practice, *in situ*. However, such generalisations are not universal.

The complexity of the lived realities of teachers' learning about the curriculum renewal process is also not something which can be understood in light of some aspect or weakness associated with previous theorising about professional educational practice – a “reading from the centre” approach. In the case presented, teachers were engaged in active dialogue to make sense of the formal rich tasks implemented in the secondary school, and how the primary curriculum might be organised to assist students engage with these tasks, and in the context of significant educational reform within the state. However, such practices are far removed from purely conceptual dilemmas about these professional practitioners' enactment of educational reform *per se*, or particular conceptions of professional practice. For the teachers involved, learning seemed to be a more situated, often co-productive process, exemplified by how the chair of the Curriculum Board shared interpretations about the New Basics from the secondary school perspective, and how primary teachers shared how existing work in the primary school already resonated with some of the mandatory New Basics rich tasks. The messy, co-productive, iterative nature of teachers' interactions also

seemed remote from the more neatly bounded or broad accounts of the nature of research into professional educational practice, including within more “scientific” conceptual literature.<sup>43</sup>

By focusing upon the specific and detailed efforts of teachers to learn about a particular educational reform initiative, the research presented is also an attempt to treat seriously, to actively incorporate, the voice of agents and actors who occupy more peripheral/marginal locations in relation to established traditions of knowledge development. Teachers’ extended deliberations and the interlocutory agreement-making they employed to endeavour to learn about the reform agenda should be recognised as important elements of the learning process, even if not always recognised in some established traditions of research into professional educational practice. Endeavouring to flag the perspectives of practitioners challenges broader “gestures of exclusion” which seek meaning-making in relation to already-established authorities. At a more macro-level, the very act of drawing upon Connell’s concept of “dirty theory” to make sense of professional educational practice is itself an example of engaging with a more marginal authority to research such practice. The concept of “dirty theory” has not been brought to bear previously on research into the field of professional educational practice.

These teachers’ learning practices also gesture towards the influence of previous practices – of a history of engagement with and inquiry into educational reform. The insistence of the primary teachers on personalising the rich tasks to be

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<sup>43</sup> Slavin’s support for randomized clinical trials is emblematic of such “scientific” conceptual accounts: Robert Slavin, “Evidence-Based Education Policies: Transforming Educational Practice and Research,” *Educational Researcher* 31, no. 7 (2002): 15-21.

employed reveals a proclivity towards education reform influenced by past inquiry experiences; the insistence that “you need to personalise [the reform agenda]” implies a history of experience in this regard. The effort to link the New Basics repertoires to existing subject disciplines is another example of situating the reform agenda within a broader history of inquiry into educational practices. Such experiences should inform, rather than be “written out,” erased from efforts to comprehend professional practice and research into such practice. That the primary teachers actively sought to understand how the New Basics was being conceived within the secondary school, and the chair of the Board kept framing the new curriculum in relation to existing discipline areas, gestures towards rich prior experiences which could be usefully explored to inform current practices, and research into such practices. These teachers sought to make sense of a reform agenda in relation to their specific inquiries into particular school settings – their specific histories. To tease out and give voice to such experiences is one means to avoid the grand erasure of lived experiences of practitioners and their replacement by more impoverished, ahistorical research accounts.

### **CONCLUSION: FOR “DIRTY THEORY”**

This extended example provides insights into how the concept of dirty theory can inform research into, and understandings of, professional educational practice. By focusing upon the details of a specific instance of teachers’ inquiries into professional learning, the paper challenges claims of universality of knowledge production. By endeavouring to avoid analysing specific experiences in light of existing dominant approaches to professional educational practice alone – “reading

from the centre” – the paper seeks to critique the privileging of established authorities. By foregrounding the stance of groups typically marginalised in the research process, and a theoretical approach which validates these perspectives, such work stands as an alternative to the “gestures of exclusion” which often disenfranchise those involved. By arguing for educational practices as historically-situated, the ideas presented also challenge the “grand erasure” promulgated by neater, more dominant, established theories of practice, and research into practice.

At the same time, and as part of this process, generalisation is deemed possible, and important, to help inform research into practice, and understandings of practice *per se*. Any generalisations need to be firmly grounded within, and developed from, specific practices. Close scrutiny of specific practices within the data presented reveal insights into the nature of professional educational practice, making it possible, in Connell’s words, “to illuminate a situation in its concreteness.”<sup>44</sup> Such illuminations then become resources which can be brought to bear dialogically in future research into practice. In relation to the specific case presented in this paper, more general theorising from the given data includes evidence of professional educational practice as a sporadic, interactive undertaking; an iterative activity involving co-production of knowledge development; an interlocutory process of agreement-making, and; as possessing a history which influences approaches to educational reform. While different concepts to help inform learning may be available within existing articulations of research into professional educational practice, such articulations may reify or eschew generalisation altogether. Empirically-grounded generalisations can and should be developed and employed as

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<sup>44</sup> Connell, *Southern Theory*, 207.

part of a process of researching specific practices within and across settings, but in the knowledge that the efficacy of such generalisations needs to remain open to critique in light of local issues, the standpoint of those involved, and the histories which inform such practices. Complexity and contradiction are not easily contained within broad general theories of practice but need to be taken into account, nonetheless. The “messiness” of actual practice calls into question efforts which seem to too neatly foreclose on this complexity.

This is not to imply that existing conceptions of professional educational practice are not useful in continued efforts to research such practice. Theorists, philosophers and researchers’ previous efforts to develop articulations of practice do contribute to researching and understanding practice. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge that this paper is itself framed by concerns about professional educational practice as an identifiable concept or field within existing educational theoretical and philosophical literature. However, in keeping with the fluid nature of theorising advocated by Connell, a sustained focus on generalising from multifaceted specific, local practices as historically informed and in dialogue with local concerns, seems instructive. By drawing upon a theoretical perspective supportive of research involving a recursive process of both use and critique of generalisations in light of specific practices, it is also surely possible to enable a more open dialogue between academics, policy-makers and practitioners about the nature of the work in which each is engaging. Such a stance can only be productive for enabling a cross-fertilisation of ideas across institutional boundaries to both better understand, and inform, professional educational practice, and challenge more regressive conceptions of research into practice. This entails a process in which: theory and research are

understood as co-constitutive; academic researchers, theorists and philosophers remain open to the contingency of practice, and; policy-makers and practitioners come to see their own work as research-intensive – not involving “applying” research to policy and practice but “us[ing] research findings to make one’s problem-solving more intelligent.”<sup>45</sup> A concern to generalise from the local as historically informed, and in dialogue with those involved, and which values the local without seeking to universalise from the local/particular, ultimately adds up to a call for a situated, messy theoretical compact – for “dirty theory.”

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<sup>45</sup> Biesta, “Why What Works Won’t Work”, 20-21.