

Reflection and the Theory-Practice Conundrum in Initial Teacher Education in the UK

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The role of theory and practice has been conceptualised in multiple ways vis-à-vis the development of teachers as reflective practitioners. Reflection has been associated with theory and practice both as a stimulus and as a response. This qualitative case study is based on part of a larger study regarding the nature and use of reflection/reflective practice in the teacher education context. The paper explores the perceptions of teacher educators and student teachers regarding the comparative influence of theory and practice on the development of student teachers as reflective practitioners in a teacher education programme in the UK. Although there is some level of variation in the perceptions of the two groups of participants, the overarching conclusion seems to be an integration of theory and practice for imparting and developing student teachers' reflectivity. The emphasis is on the inclusivity and interdependence of theoretical knowledge of the teaching learning process and exposure to practical teaching during the training programmes for a useful preparation of the student teachers as beginning classroom practitioners. The study has important implications for the incorporation of reflection in education programmes.

Keywords: reflection, teacher education, postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE), theory and practice, student teachers

Theory and practice are two essential and intricately associated components of most teacher education programmes. The association of theory and practice in teacher education is often a complex one. Literature review reveals three competing (but not exclusive) positions on the theory-practice relationship in teacher education programmes. First, the more practical oriented programmes with a primary aim of giving training in teaching skills, classroom management, and survival techniques. The aim is to prepare beginning teachers to deliver curriculum rather than to question and transform the process of education and its aims. The second position supports the more critical perspective where the central aim of teacher education is the preparation of new teachers as critically reflective practitioners and as transformative intellectuals as compared to being technical functionaries (Giroux 1988). This kind of teacher preparation aims at developing them as professionals with deeper understanding of the concepts and processes of teaching, learning, education and the ability to reflect on and shape the broader socio-political aims of the process of education. Advocates of this position favour strong theoretical grounding of the beginning teachers.

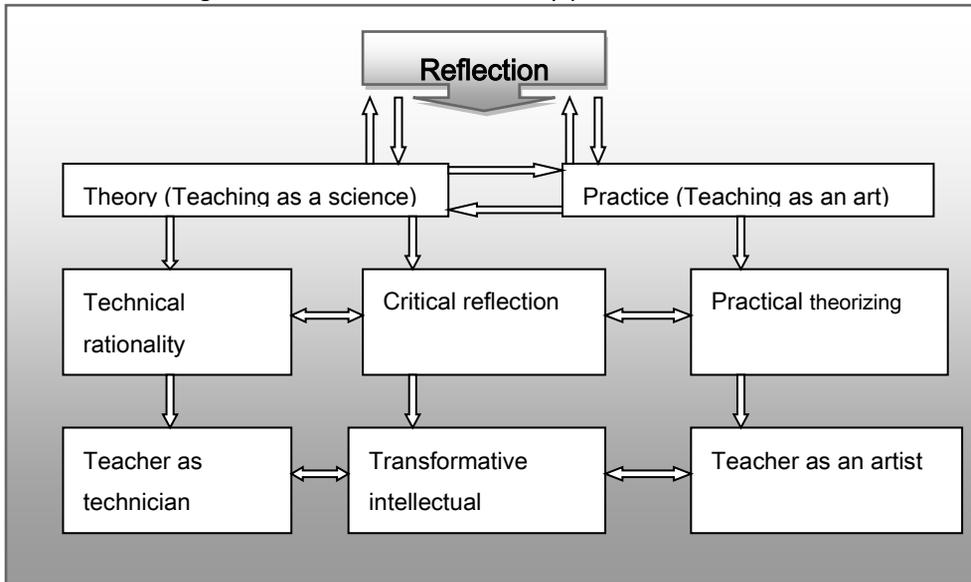
The third position that seems to be a compromise between these two divergent positions represents the concept of teaching as a craft rather than a positive science based on technical rationality (Schön 1983) or a critical/moral science (Zeichner 1981, Zeichner and Liston 1987; Tom 1985; Beyer 1989) and that of a teacher as a technical craftsman who learns best during action through practical theorising (McIntyre 1993; Eraut 1994; Carr 1995) and practical rationality (Laursen 2007). Theory in this conception means more of a process rather than propositional knowledge (Lawes 2003, 2006). Reflection in this process is useful in developing and enacting theoretical knowledge into practice and assists teachers at various stages of their professional career. Pollard et al. (2008, 14) advocate the usefulness of reflection for the novice teachers at the immediate practical skills level; for competent teachers as a means for more self-conscious understanding and improving of capability and for the expert teachers as means for deliberating about issues related to "children, curriculum, classroom and school". This highlights the usefulness of reflection in a variety of situations. Smyth (1989, 4) argues that reflection can "vary from a concern with the micro aspects of the teaching-learning process and subject-matter of knowledge, to macro concerns about political/ethical principles underlying teaching and the relationship of schooling to the wider institutions and hierarchies of society". Smyth, nonetheless, cautions against technocratic

reductionism of the teaching learning process which can diminish the role of a teacher to that of a passive agent of a cycle of perpetuation and inertia.

In a similar vein, Moore (2004, 7) warns against the “dangers of reductionism” vis-à-vis the teacher’s role in terms of it being competent craftsperson versus reflective practitioner which, he argues, remains dominant in the official discourses in teacher education. According to Moore, such exclusive support of one over the other would weaken both approaches and would “marginalise alternative teacher-education discourses” such as that of the *charismatic subject* based on the idea of idiosyncrasy, creativity, exceptionality and contingency. Arguing for teaching as both ‘an art as well as a science’ conception, Moore, suggests a more pragmatic approach where these discourses are adopted in concert with each other for a more supportive role in the process of effective teaching and learning. He urges that all of these approaches have strengths as well as weaknesses and that one should benefit from the relative strengths of each while keeping guard against its weakness and potential problems. This, he suggests, can be achieved through a more pragmatic and inclusive attitude towards one or another of these approaches. There appears to be a number of congruent points in these various positions in the way they are being interpreted and implemented and in terms of developing reflection. This seems to support the view that, “A concept of reflection [should be] robust enough to act as a guiding principle for teacher education [and] must synthesize... rather than exclude, the multiple realms of reflection” (Markham 1999, 57).

The following diagram [Figure1] presents a tentative illustrative model representing these three views regarding the role of theory and practice in the development of beginning teachers as reflective practitioners and the interaction and complexity involved there in.

Figure 1: Reflection and the theory-practice interaction



The diagram in Figure 1 signifies the complexity involved in the relationship between theory and practice and their respective impact on reflection on the one hand and on the other the differing conceptualisations of reflection itself. Further, it aims to indicate that reflection is associated with theory and practice both as stimulus and response. Theory and practice then have reciprocal impact on each other which could be interpreted to varying degrees in either direction. The impact of theory and practice and their mutual relationship has been explained in this diagram in three ways. According to the technical-rational model, theory carries a very central role, theory is developed empirically by social scientists, researchers and theoreticians and the practitioner’s role is to understand its practical relevance and to find ways and means for its implementation during practice. According to this understanding of theory-practice interaction, in a teaching-learning situation,

the teacher would play the role of the practitioner. In the critical-theoretical model, the role of theory and hence of reflection goes beyond the practical implementation of theory encompassing issues such as questioning and critiquing the value of the educational experience and analysing the impact of the educational process on issues of wider import such as justice, emancipation and equity. The role of the teacher, hence, becomes that of the transformative intellectual (Giroux 1988) whose job is not just the transfer of knowledge but also its transformation. In the third interpretation of reflection and its interaction with theory and practice, the emphasis is on 'practical theorising', where theory comes out more as an outcome of practice rather than the vice-versa. Reflection happens during the practice leading to an inductive and intuitive process of theory-forming. The role of the teacher thus becomes that of a practical theoretician and artist rather than that of a mere practitioner or a transformative intellectual.

The multiple conceptualisations of the concept of reflection presented above and the theory-practice interaction in this makes it interesting to explore the issue in the light of the perspectives of practitioners of reflection (teacher educators and student teachers). That is what this study aimed to do. The main research question around which this study revolved was: What is the respective role of theory and practice in the development of reflection among prospective teachers in the PGCE programme under study?

The education programme under study was a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE-Secondary). The PGCE (Secondary) is a one year initial teacher education course aimed at training graduates in various subjects for teaching in the secondary schools. The programme lasts for a maximum of 36 weeks out of which a major portion i.e. 24 weeks is spent by the student teachers in local secondary schools getting primarily practical teaching experience called teaching practice. This time is spent in two blocks in two different schools, one block in the beginning of the PGCE year and one towards the end. The remaining 12 weeks are divided between school and university sessions. In the university part student teachers get instruction in various areas of professional development besides subject-matter and teaching techniques related training in their respective subjects under the supervision of their university tutors. The programme, therefore, is based on partnership between the university and the schools where the university plays the role of overall supervision besides providing training in subject-matter and education studies and research and the school that of the practical provider of teaching practice and practical classroom experience. The student teachers remain for the most part in the supervision and guidance of the school co-tutors who play the role of mentors throughout the training year. As mentors the school co-tutors have a dual role as guides and supporters and as assessors of the student teachers' progress throughout the training duration.

During the university part of the PGCE the training is mainly provided in two ways: One, training sessions under the supervision of their respective subject tutors in relevant subject rooms/centres are conducted two days per week throughout their twelve weeks on the university campus. Two, whole-cohort sessions are conducted both under the supervision of the PGCE tutors and variously other resource persons both from among the faculty members of the university Faculty of Education and from members of academia and experienced practitioners from outside the university such as education leaders and subject and curriculum experts. The whole-cohort sessions are guided by a centrally controlled programme of training sessions and mainly the Head of Secondary PGCE programme is responsible for providing training resources and resource persons for running and implementing this part of the training. On the other hand provision of training in the various subject areas is mainly the responsibility of the relevant subject tutor(s)/university tutor(s). The university tutor, too, has a dual role as trainer/guide and as an assessor of the progress that the student teachers make on various stages of the training programme.

Method

This qualitative case study (Cohen et al. 2007) was conducted at a University in the UK. Qualitative case studies are useful for exploring issues based on perceptions (Stake 1995). Data were collected from 14 University tutors and 21 student teachers using a combination of standardised open-ended (Patton 1980), semi-structured

interview techniques (Cohen et al. 2007) and semi-structured questionnaires. Semi-structured interviews are useful data collection tools for obtaining detailed perceptions regarding educational and social phenomenon (Cohen et al. 2007). Qualitative studies are often based on smaller samples of participants whose perceptions are explored in depth (Stake, 1995, Cohen et al. 2007). Participants were accessed using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Information thus availed was analysed using thematic analysis techniques suggested by researchers such as Miles and Huberman (1994) and Braun and Clarke (2006). Braun and Clarke provide a six steps process of thematic analysis that include *familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing report*. Most of these processes were followed in combination with *data reduction, data display and drawing conclusions* suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). The study was conducted keeping in view ethical considerations such as anonymity and informed consent for participation (Cohen et al. 2007).

Results

Most of the university tutors and student teachers argued that there was a good balance of the theoretical and practical component in the programme. A number of tutors contrasted the present model of the PGCE with the older models in place in the 1980's and argued that the latter, mostly university-based and theoretical in nature, were more leisurely but did not suit the practical needs of the student teachers. It was, therefore, suggested that though the existing structure of the PGCE was pressured it was better suited to preparing teachers for the job at hand that is, practical teaching in the schools. Tutors argued that reflection was best taught and understood during practice rather than as a theoretical concept. Most student teachers too associated reflection with thinking during action, that is, during classroom teaching in the practice schools. As one student teacher put it, "There is no better way to reflect upon something than to apply it in practice". Another student teacher associating the school based of the training programme to reflection during action argued:

I found it incredibly tiring and overwhelming, but it is where you are in the situation that it [theory] all makes sense, it's all in context and you can see the results of changes that we make directly there in front of us, not in theory, not in writing. It is a rollercoaster, but it's far more meaningful than being at Uni. Although Uni does give many ideas to try, but it somehow doesn't mean as much until after the first placement.

A majority of the participants argued that theory and practice could not be separated. The idea was that while in the university student teachers were not just learning theory and while in schools their only pre-occupation was not doing practice, the two processes went hand-in-hand. The concurrence on the part of the university tutors seemed to be on a rejection of the *technical rational or theory-into-practice* (Schön 1983; Gore 1987; Killen 1989) model of teacher education. However, this did not seem to mean a denial of theoretical underpinnings of practice, a position closer to that of the influential reflective models presented by Schön (1983, 1987) or by authors such as Lawlor (1990) and O'Hear (1988) who tend to go in the almost opposite direction, that of a complete censure of propositional knowledge (Carr 2006) and the consequent non-relevance of the university in initial teacher education. Carr (2006 (in Thomas 2007, 4) for instance presents this extreme position on the non-relevance of theory when he argues:

[E]ducational theory is...the name we give to the... futile attempts that have been made...to stand outside...educational practices... to explain and justify them... [The] time has now come to... bring the whole educational theory enterprise to a dignified end.

The assumption here seems to be that education theorists develop their theories completely outside practice. This is difficult to accept, however, keeping in view the fact that most theorists would have been associated with practical education in one way or another. So in that sense as it is difficult to imagine a completely practical practitioner, it is difficult to imagine a thorough theoretical theoretician as an education researcher. Kemmis in Carr (1995, 14) argues on similar lines when he says, "...people do not stay neatly in role: at times, setting aside the role of practitioners of theorizing, the education theorist is a practitioner of education (a teacher); at times the teacher (as educational practitioner) is a theorist". The findings in this present study too tend to support the view that lies between the two competing positions of technical rationality or education as

propositional science and a total rejection of the relevance of theory in the process or technicism (Gore 1987; Killen 1989). As a university teacher argued:

I think the two go hand in hand and naturally you can't say right now we have done the theory go and put into practice because I think that all part of the reflection is using the theory to inform your practice. So I think it should be a constant practice of theory feeding into the practice. But you got to have the practice; you can't ever become a good teacher by just theorising. So I think it should be integrated.

Most student teachers too supported the reflection-during-action notion which they argued was closer to their practical realities as beginning teachers. The following quote by a student teacher is an instance of this line of thought:

The school-based part was probably most important [for reflection] as the practice is much harder than the theory. In theory I am able to control a classroom; in practice the dynamics of a class can change so rapidly that you always have to think on your foot which is a skill that can only come with practice.

Korthagen and Kessels (1999, 9-13) point out the importance of Gestalts, a psychological state of mind that provides a holistic understanding in context and are "linked to concrete situations...coloured by the subjective and value-laden experiences of such situations". They suggest that student teachers who are more likely to be at the Gestalt stage of their teaching career, should have more practical teaching experience in the beginning of teacher education and that *phronetic* rather than *epistemic* knowledge should be the mainstay of the teacher education programmes (see also Korthagen and Kessels 1999). This coincides with the consensus in this study on the position that the course should be guided by theory instead of being theory-led and resonates the conception of theory in terms of initial teacher education that Korthagen and Kessels (1999, 13) present when they argue that, "...theory in a traditional academic sense can only have a limited place in pre-service programmes. Still it is an important place, as *phronesis* is to be considered of a higher quality if it is fed by *episteme*".

Overall, both university tutors and student teachers argued for an essential role of the university and for an essential mix of theory and practice during initial teacher education programmes. Completely school-based teacher training was associated with technicism and de-intellectualisation. Such training was also described as a top-down re-structuring of schooling where teachers are reduced to the status of knowledge-consumers instead of knowledge critics and creators, ideas associated with reflection (Zeichner & Liston 1996; Beyer 1989). That type of theory-free training, it was argued, would hamper teachers' ability to theorise because of their "limited repertoire of available concepts, ideas, and principles" (Eraut 1994, 74). A university tutor put it thus:

My issue with taking Higher Education out of initial teacher education is that it actually de-intellectualises it and makes it into an apprenticeship and it gives the impression that teaching is an easy job.

The concern shown by tutors of a possible de-intellectualisation of initial teacher education in the absence of university involvement echoes McIntyre's (1993, 39) position regarding what he sees as the 'remarkably primitive view of teacher education' promoted by 'right-wing populists' such as O'Hear (1988), the Hillgate Group (1989) and Lawlor (1990) who presented that what teachers needed was practical competence and that comes through practical teaching in the school rather than lesson in theory taught in the university.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this current study indicate a support for the contemporary understanding of reflection, that is, its development as a more practical activity rather than as a theoretical concept during initial teacher education programmes such as the PGCE. The emphasis was on student teachers' learning during practice rather than through theory. The participants seemed to echo McIntyre (1993, 51) who supports the role of theory in terms of it being "suggestions for practice in learning how to teach". The findings of this research also supported

the view presented by McIntyre (1993, 1995) that a complete elimination of propositional knowledge and hence of the role of the university would be harmful for the short-term and long-term professional development of student-teachers. However, the findings also indicate a slight diversion from McIntyre's (1993, 1995) contention that reflection is a more useful learning tool for experienced teachers rather than beginning teachers. In that sense McIntyre seems to imply that student teachers need more explicit theory and ideas to inform their practices. In contrast, experienced teachers' use of theoretical models according to him is more implicit and hence the process of reflection for them is more intuitive and autonomous rather than in need of being fed by any explicit theory. In this study, however, university tutors supported the idea of more useful reflection during practice.

On the whole findings from this study and what McIntyre (1993, 1995) presented seems to be an outcome of a pragmatic approach to the use of theory and practice in initial teacher education. The support is for the provision of theory at the minimum possible level in a political and educational environment which is increasingly apathetic to the role or significance of theory in teacher education in general and initial teacher education in particular (O'Hear 1988; Lawlor 1990; Carr 2006). On a more fundamental level, however, there is the view that this minimal provision of theory or theory as 'suggestions for practice' (McIntyre 1993) is inadequate for developing student-teachers' reflection at the broader, critical level. Such minimal inclusion of theory that is possible in the amount of time available in the PGCE might result in a superficial understanding among student teachers regarding their role as teachers and of the educational process in terms of its broader aims. One important consequence of such limited role for theory in initial teacher education would be an understanding of reflection more as a psychological, subjective and implicit process rather than as a rational process of inquiry. Hence reflective practice in this sense may result in encouraging compliance and conformity rather than a critical approach to educational theory and practice (Lawes 2003).

Further, it seems those who take teaching as a primarily *practical* activity and as a *craft* seem to have a superficial understanding of the educational process. Interestingly this school of thought is apparently winning the debate as initial teacher education in England is becoming more practical leaving little space for theory. Those who present the more pragmatic course, that is, the practical theorising model or the theory-practice-going-together model mainly represent teacher-educators in universities and colleges. They are increasingly finding it hard to keep the role of theory to some minimum level in the present predominantly school-centred ITE. And the advocates of a more critical role for theory and hence for reflection to encompass issues of broader *critical* import seem to have lost the cause if not the argument (Lawes 2003).

Interestingly, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, which came into to power in May, 2010 seem to take this agenda a step further by supporting a more school-based teacher *training*. The government is promoting the idea of *teaching schools* where new entrants into the teaching profession are provided training on-the-job and where "trainee teachers can observe and learn from great teachers" (Gove, 2011). An OFSTED (2009/10, 59) study found that "There was more outstanding initial teacher education delivered by higher education-led partnerships than by school-centred initial teacher training partnerships and employment-based routes". When this was pointed out by an MP during a parliamentary debate over the 2010 White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching*, the Secretary of State for Education argued that there was other research that supports the school-based ITE. Countering an argument regarding the possible threat to an efficiently working university-based ITE, the secretary suggested the idea of lab-schools for university ITE providers which he argued was popular in countries such as the USA. The new School White Paper (DfE, 2010), entitled *The Importance of Teaching*, also promotes the idea of more school-based ITE and the increasingly popular *Teach First* concept which encourages new graduates from top-universities to join the teaching profession and get training on-the-job. Both of these initiatives seem to be rooted in the belief in a more practical *craft* nature of teaching and on-job teacher *training*.

Although the structure of the PGCE under this study was two-third school-based, the White Paper seems to make the ITE (or rather ITT) more school-based. This, according to the DfE (2010) was aimed at reforming ITE to make it more practical, school based and skill oriented. This reflect an emphasis on the *what* and *how* of education (Partington 1999; Galea 2010). The *what* of teaching centres on the issues of subject-teaching and the *how* on the teaching-methods. The government policy appears to be focused on the *how* of

teaching regarding the preparation of new teachers while the *what* or subject-matter in terms of the school curriculum is deemed to be the prerogative of the government policy makers. This, however, is likely to lead to neglecting a third and vital question regarding the process of education and the role of the teacher in it, the *why* question, which focuses on the rationale of the educational process itself, acknowledgment of which might mean more emphasis on the theoretical grounding of the initial teacher education. According to Pearson (1989, 147), a teacher is not just a subject expert such as a biologist or a chemist or a mathematician. In addition the teacher should have an understanding of their subject in light of the overall development and education of the students. This approach stresses preparing teachers to think about the relevance of their subjects to other subjects and to the general aims of the total educational experience and not just the acquisition of knowledge and skills to teach a particular subject. It is this kind of requirement on the part of the teacher that makes their job more than proficiency in subject knowledge and classroom teaching and consequently teacher education more than training for competence in subject-matter teaching and classroom management. It is probably here that the vital role of the university, for a balanced preparation of new teachers as educators in a broader sense and not just as subject teachers, comes out significantly. Further, it is for this kind of broader critical role as teachers, that the incorporation of a more theoretical/higher level of reflection is needed in initial teacher education programmes.

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