

Teaching Practices from a Theoretical Perspective

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KEYWORDS foundation phase, professional development, professional learning, teacher practices

ABSTRACT Teaching practices are important for understanding and improving educational processes. They are closely linked to teachers' strategies for coping with challenges in their daily professional life and to their general well-being, and they shape the learning environment and influence learner motivation and achievement. This paper aimed to investigate teaching practices for professional development from the positivist paradigm and social practice theories. This view focuses on learners not as passive recipients but as active participants in the process of acquiring knowledge. Teachers holding this view emphasise facilitating student inquiry, prefer to give students the chance to develop solutions to problems on their own, and allow students to play active role in instructional activities. The method used was a literature study, which reviewed practice theory. This paper assessed practice theory in terms of extent to which it is able to describe and explain the phenomena of professional learning and practice. This review demonstrated that positivism provides a

potentially useful epistemological tool in the discourse of teachers' professional development.

I. INTRODUCTION

The paper explores the notion of practice from a theoretical perspective and its importance in education. It begins with the concept itself and how it was conceptualized. The social and cultural practice theories are also presented. In the paper, we further elaborate on the professional practice, teaching as a professional and social practice with specific reference to the Foundation Phase and its implications for a foundation phase classroom.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Theory and practice are not only related, but they are each essential to education and teacher practices as the best theory is informed by practice and that the best practice should be grounded in theory.

Hamilton (2005) traces the word practice from a German origin. The word can be described as *Praxis* and that, in a simplified English translation, can be represented by the word *doing*. This is a simplification because it signifies a verb form (*I do*) that, in English, has the complementary form, *I am doing*. This is known as the *continuous* form, and conveys a sense of continuity or process. Teaching as a continuous process is a practice.

In Polkinghorne's (2004: 6) terms, "practice" refers "primarily to engaged action or activity", and to "activity aimed at accomplishing a variety of tasks". Later, this practice is described as "activity directed towards accomplishing a goal" (Polkinghorne 2004: 71). It is, according to Schwandt (2005: 319), the primacy of practice, and by the notion that practice can be conceived as itself a form of knowledge, or "knowing".

The term "practice" does not refer, primarily, to the sensuous objective activity of the individual but to the activity and the total experience of mankind in the course of historical development for in instance during the struggle of South Africans freedom against the Apartheid Regime. In the context, content and performance, are all practical social activities. Because of what the World history, contemporary practice expresses people's infinitely

varied relations with nature and with each other in material and cultural production e.g. Soviet Bolshevik Revolution, French Revolution, South African Revolution etc.

According to Warde (2004:17) “a **‘practice’**... is a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another for instance forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their uses, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge. Reckwitz (2002:249-250) ascribes to a **practice** as “... forms of ‘blocks’ whose existence necessarily depend on the existence and specific interconnectedness of these elements”. He adds that a practice becomes a set of interconnected heterogeneous elements, and artefacts are included as elements in the constitution of practices. A further argument he provide is that “...carrying out a practice very often means using particular things in a certain way. It might sound trivial to stress that in order to play football we need a ball and goal posts as indispensable ‘resources’” (2002: 253).

In brief, the point of departure is that people in their everyday life are engaged in practices. Practices are meaningful to people because they lead them to their destination in terms of what they have set themselves to achieve. Performing a practice usually requires using various tools and artefacts, such as equipment, materials, and infrastructures. However, this aspect does not make people conscious of the fact that they are consuming resources in their daily activities, even though they are. Primarily, people are practitioners who indirectly, through the performance of various practices, draw on resources (Røpke 2009).

Theories are useful tools that help us to understand and explain the world around us. Theories suggest the way things are, not the way things ought to be. They are not inherently good or bad; however, they can be used for good or bad purposes. A prominent function of theory is providing an orientation base for reflection on practice. The process of applying theory to practice is mostly encouraged and valued in at least education. It remain however relatively poorly understood process and continue to confuse both students and some practitioners in education.

TEACHER PRACTICE

As discussed practice is the integration of ideas which link thinking with doing by people in contexts. Practice, from the introspective point in education is, therefore, teachers’ behaviour

regarding educational matters, within and outside the classroom based on theories that they consider valid which can give direction towards the achievement of set aims and objectives. Lindgren view practice in education, as well as in other fields as based on theory (Lindgren 1957:333). According to Fitzmaurice (2010:18), this kind of practice focuses on methods and techniques based on the qualities and disposition of the practitioner (teachers') practice is a thoughtful, informed, responsible, state of the art of teaching in practice. Teaching as a practice involves standards of excellence. To enter into such practice it becomes an obligation to accept the set standards and to be judge based on performance and outcomes. Generally, participation takes place in communities of practice that portrays a social group in which its members share given activities(Garcia, Sanchez &Escudero 2002).

Teachers, as described in the literature presented in this review, are all-in-one instructors, counsellors, supervisors and managers, who are expected to translate homogeneous national curricula into individualized learning. This should be done in such a way that the curricula cater for the diverse needs of students in increasingly multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-levelled environments and be accountable for the success of these students on national assessment processes (Matras 2009).

Other authors see teaching as a complex, fluid activity that does not lend itself to an easy definition (Titus &Gremler 2010). Titus and Gremler (2010), however, feel that teaching consists of activities that transfer knowledge from instructors (teachers) to learners in a teaching-learning situation. Teachers as human beings are complex and, depending on their uniquely situated experiences and life in classrooms, they form their own principles, which influence and direct their practices.

II. METHODOLOGY

This article reviews literature on teaching practices based on social practice theories within the positivist paradigm.

Positivist Paradigm

From a research perspective, how people look at the world falls on a continuum between positivist and interpretive paradigm (Braa&Vidgen 1999). A positivist approach to research is

logical, empirical and value-free (Susman&Evered 1978). The researcher is an observer, acts as an outsider to the process, and tries not to intervene in the situation (Braa&Vidgen 1999). A positivist creates new knowledge only when it can be verified through measurement and observation (Domholdt 2005). Positivist research usually starts with a theory or predetermined relationship, which is then, investigated using structured instruments such as surveys or laboratory experiments (Orlikowski&Baroudi 1991). To be valid, the results must be replicable and applied universally.

Theoretical framework

According to Postill (2010) the first-generation of practice theorists sought a virtuous middle path between the excesses of methodological individualism (the claim that social phenomena must be explained by showing how they result from individual actions') and those of its logical opposite, methodological holism (the explanation of phenomena by means of structures or social wholes, Ryan 1970). Giddens as cited in Postill (2010) argues that we cannot separate 'individuals' from the day-to-day contexts they help to constitute

Schatzki (2002) distinguishes four main types of practice theorists. These are philosophers (such as Wittgenstein, Dreyfus, or Taylor), social theorists (Bourdieu, Giddens), cultural theorists (Foucault) and theorists of science and technology (Latour, Rouse, Pickering). Focus here is on the theorists of the twentieth century (e.g. Bourdieu 1977, Foucault 1979, Giddens 1979, 1984) as they, according to Postill (2010) laid the foundations of what we now regard as practice theory. These are the social and cultural theorists.

Postill (2010) argues that in Bourdieu's theory of practice, the world's structural constraints form 'permanent dispositions'. Bourdieu borrows the Greek word 'hexis' to refer to the way in which social agents 'carry themselves' in the world; their gait (pace), gesture, postures, etc. (Jenkins 2002: 75).

It is important to understand what makes a social practice the particular practice it is because practices of the same kind differ at various times and places. Langford (1989) refers to a social practice as interaction between individuals. This depends on the circumstances in which each individual finds him/herself.

Bourdieu's formulation of practice involves not only action in time and space, but the intentions, meanings, values and understandings of the practitioner. He presupposes ideas about the nature and structure of the practice that are embedded in the practitioner's understandings of the practice. Thus the notion of *habitus* as a historically and institutionally constituted set of predispositions to enter a setting able to be a 'player' in the kind of game for this setting (for example, a football field, or a government office) flexibly and openly. Also with a 'practical sense' about what the setting might offer on this occasion (for example, opportunities to succeed or transgress). *Habitus* can be defined as a system of dispositions (lasting, acquired schemes of perception, thought and action). Crudely put, the *habitus* is the system of dispositions, which individuals have.

A closely related notion to Bourdieu's *habitus* is Michel Foucault's (1979) concept of 'discipline'. Like *habitus*, discipline 'is structure and power that have been impressed on the body forming permanent dispositions' (Eriksen & Nielsen 2001: 130). In contrast to Bourdieu, though, Foucault laid particular emphasis on the violence through which modern regimes impress their power (or 'biopower') on bodies (2001: 130).

Like Bourdieu, the British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1979, 1984) first developed an original version of practice theory in the 1970s, but he arrived there via a very different route. Where Bourdieu grounded his theories in empirical research, Giddens is more concerned with the history of philosophy and social theory than with sociological data (Eriksen & Nielsen 2001: 129).

Giddens' theory of structuration is that social practices become the site of the social (Giddens 1984). Thus, practices are the basic ontological units for analysis. This implies that individual actions are constituted by practices. Generally, social order, structures, and institutions come into being through practices. Social life, thus, consists of a wide range of practices, such as negotiation, cooking, banking, recreation, political, religious and educational practices (Schatzki 2002:70). This work contributes to the elaborate understanding of the constitution and change of practices.

III. LITERATURE FINDINGS

Practices in particular fields

Practices are defined in different ways and in particular fields, and we can talk about practices in a particular field.

- Practice Field – classroom teaching and teacher education
- Practice in the field – skills, knowledge, etc. (Kemmis)
- Bernstein – Field
- Who in the field has been talking about practices and what research in the period of five years.

At a later stage, Bourdieu added the notion of ‘field’ to practice-theoretical vocabulary (see Bourdieu 1992, 1993, 2005, Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, Swartz 1997, Reed-Danahay 2005). Fields are specialist domains of practice (e.g. art, photography, sociology) with their own ‘logic’ that are constituted by a unique combination of species of capital, e.g. financial capital, symbolic capital (prestige, renown) or social capital (‘connections’).

A field is, in the first instance, a structured space of positions, *a force field* that imposes its specific determinations upon all those who enter it. Thus, anyone who wants to succeed as a scientist has no choice but to acquire the minimal “scientific capital” required and to abide by the regulations enforced by the scientific milieu of that time and place.

In the second instance, a field is an arena of struggle through which agents and institutions seek to preserve or overturn the existing distribution of capital (manifested, in the scientific field, by the ranking of institutions, disciplines, theories, methods, topics, journals, prizes, etc.): it is a *battlefield* wherein the bases of identity and hierarchy are endlessly disputed over. An apt metaphor for a field is that of a game. Only players with sufficient ‘know-how’ and belief in the game will be willing to invest time and effort playing it. This has particular reference to the field of teaching as teachers are the ones who know how to teach.

Bourdieu uses the concept of *field* as structured social space with its own rules, schemes of domination, legitimate opinions and so on. Fields are relatively autonomous from the wider social structure (or space, in his terminology), in which people relate and struggle through a complex of connected social relations (both direct and indirect). The habitus must be seen not simply as a historically produced structure that functions to reproduce the social system that generated it, but as a set of schemes both imposed and imposing. It is in the interest of certain

groups that a particular manner of doing, a specific standardized mode of achieving all the diverse tasks posed by social life, be considered the only possible way of acting. The official representation of practice is an imposition of meaning, a continual enactment of symbolic violence, that coercively, yet unobtrusively, channels how participants can construe the social world.

Habitus is at once *structured*, by the patterned social forces that produced it. It gives form and coherence to the various activities of an individual across the separate spheres of life. This is why Bourdieu defines it in various ways as “the product of structure, producer of practice, and reproducer of structure,” the “unchosen principle of all choices,” or “the practice-unifying and practice-generating principle” that permits “regulated improvisation” and the “conductorless orchestration” of conduct. Habitus is also a principle of *both social continuity and discontinuity*: continuity because it stores social forces into the individual organism and transports them across time and space; discontinuity because it can be modified through the acquisition of new dispositions and because it can trigger innovation whenever it encounters a social setting discrepant with the setting from which it issues

For Schatzki (2001: 3), ‘the social is a field of embodied, materially interwoven practices centrally organized around shared practical understandings’. The maintenance of practices over time depends on ‘the successful inculcation of shared embodied know-how’ (2001: 3) as well as on their continued performance (Postill 2010).

The relationship between habitus and field is a two-way relationship. The field exists only insofar as social agents possess the dispositions and set of perceptual schemata that are necessary to constitute that field and imbue it with meaning. Concomitantly, by participating in the field, agents incorporate into their habitus the proper know-how that will allow them to constitute the field. Habitus manifests the structures of the field, and the field mediates between habitus and practice.

Teaching as a social practice

The main question here is why do teachers think of being teachers in a particular way. D’eon, Overgaard and Harding (2000) argue that teaching as a practice is complex, intellectually demanding activity with five essential features which are (1) teaching is purposive (define practice); any of a large number of behaviours and (2) activities may qualify as teaching, (3)

teaching is a rational enterprise and this is, in part, tied to its purposive nature, (4) teaching is a communal, as opposed to an individual enterprise, and the (5) practice of teaching has a strong moral dimension

Teaching is purposive. Teaching is necessarily a purposive activity. We must teach something to someone with a purpose in mind which, generally speaking is to get someone to learn something, to understand something, to do something, or to appreciate something, and so on.

Teaching involves a variety of activities. A second essential feature of teaching is that teaching can involve a range of very different activities. The activities are limited to the extent that they must have potential to achieve the purposes of the practice, and they ought to be appropriate in the given context.

Teaching is a rational enterprise. Teachers ultimately ought to be able to justify their actions by providing relevant reasons for them in relation to purpose and context (Scheffler 1965). Rationality in teaching also means taking the context into consideration.

Teaching is a communal enterprise. Teaching as a practice in schools cannot be understood merely by examining the individual actions of a teacher engaged in the practice or the collective individual actions of some or all of the teachers.

Teaching has an important moral dimension. Teaching in schools and in classrooms is a moral practice. Teachers have a role in developing the moral character of the learners consistent with ethical standards. Teachers are charged with the responsibility to both students and society for the training of the students and they have considerable authority in their roles.

To view teaching as a social practice is to acknowledge, first and foremost, the expectations society has for teaching, or in other words, the particular purposes of teaching.

Furthermore, the second feature of a social practice matches that aspect of teaching that involves common patterns of action or behaviour, which are explaining, showing, questioning, justifying, judging, and correcting.

The third features of a social practice include norms and standards, which are evident in the practice of teaching. In the course of the teachers' day-to-day teaching activities, they may not be able to explain why they act in certain ways.

How teachers understand themselves as teachers in a social practice of teaching. Langford (1989) argues that it is necessary to look at the concept of a person and that of a social practice and understand the relation between them. This relation is internal and depends on each other for being what it is. The overall purpose shared by members has a tendency to shape a social practice and its existence and identity is entirely dependent on its members. Teachers must see themselves as teachers in a social practice of teaching.

Understanding what a teacher is depends on understanding the social practice of teaching and its purpose. In the South African Context, the social practice of teaching is concerned about what teaching is and the forms of schooling that advance it (Morrow 2007). Morrow believes that the practice of teaching is the organization of systematic learning, which is the formal object of teaching and the role of the teacher. He claims that there are poor teaching practices because teachers do not understand what education is and further states that unless the concept of teaching is retrieved there are no hope of getting learning right.

Professional practice

According to Green (2009) "Professional practice" is itself, of course, a construct linking two concepts. On the one hand, what might simply be seen as an adjective, a qualifying term "professional" contains with it the notion of "profession", and also that of "the professional", or of being or becoming "a professional".

Green (2009) argues that professional practice is complex. He explains **what it is**, or **what it is constituted as**, and **why and how it matters**. *Professional practice* is at the heart of all these concerns and questions, and yet this is something that is arguably still in need of clarification and elaboration, as is indeed the concept of practice itself.

The term "professional experience" is often capitalised and mobilised as a replacement for "practicum", in some circles at least. Here again there is sometimes a certain overlap, with

“professional experience” used to refer to engagement in pre-service practice of the profession at issue before being immersed in the “real world”, as it were. In teaching, this is the period when students are sent out on teaching practice (school-based experience).

There are at least four senses in which the term “professional practice” might be understood and operationalised. Firstly, it can be taken as referring to the notion of *practising a profession*, as in the familiar expression “practising medicine” or “practising law”. Hence, one might similarly refer to “practising education” or (perhaps better) “practising teaching”, or “practising nursing” and the like, although these latter usages are admittedly awkward formulations, for reasons that perhaps bear some thinking about (think about characteristics of a profession, which are not part of this paper). Secondly, it could refer to the notion of *practising professionalism*—that is, the fact that one enacts professionalism, one practises what it is to *be* professional, or to be *a* professional. In this case, professionalism is itself to be understood as a practice phenomenon, a matter therefore of practice and identity. Thirdly, and relatedly, it can be understood as referring to, or evoking, *a moral-ethical quality*: a distinctive quality of being-in-the-world, an attitude or disposition towards the objects of one’s practice, whether they be persons or not. Finally, a practice might be described as “professional”—in contrast, then, to what might be seen as the sphere of the “amateur”—analogously to what happens in sport and other arenas (e.g. dancing), where one is paid a fee for the service that one provides and enacts, often on an explicit, formally constructed scale. In our case, all of these senses might be seen as being relevant, to differing degrees. Professional practice fields are distributed across the private and public sectors. They feature various schemes of employment and remuneration and involve extensive programmes of pre-service education and training (and in some case, renewal and re-accreditation). Moreover, all require a certain disposition to be instilled in their members, an appropriate professional attitude regarding conduct and relationships (Green 2009).

With regard to practice itself, it might be useful to think in terms of three distinct but interrelated categories, namely, “activity”, “experience” and “context”. What is it that teachers do, what have they gained, how do they use their experience and make their activity relevant to the context.

Britzman (2003: 3) argues that the practice of teaching, because it is concocted from relations with others and occurs in structures that are not of one’s own making, but first and foremost, an uncertain experience that one must learn to interpret and make significant”. It is pertinent to note that Britzman’s focus here is on initial teacher education, but her argument

has bearing on thinking about professional practice more generally. This is because (professional) practice is undeniably experiential, at least part of the time, and perhaps different ways and senses. One “experiences” practice, one lives through it, aware that it is happening; one remembers it, afterwards; one looks forward to it, or not. It is an object of fear, of fantasy, and always of imagination

Beck and Young (2005) speak of a particular form of “knowledge-based professionalism”, with close links to more or less traditionally conceived university structures and cultures, and their concern ultimately is with questions of *knowledge*. They note accordingly “the emergence of a new kind of professionalism with much weaker ties to the acquisition and production of knowledge in universities and much stronger links to practice in the “real world” (Beck & Young 2005: 192). There are two points to make here. The first is the emphatic counter-posing of “knowledge” to “practice”, which is symptomatic of what we would argue is an important problematic. The other is that such an argument, in postulating and critiquing a new phase in professionalism, obscures the manner in which for quite some time now there has been a more or less parallel emergence of distinctive fields of professional practice which differently engage this problematic. The relationship between knowledge and practice is indeed crucial, but it needs to be understood outside current-traditional frames of reference.

Schwandt (2005) provides guidance in this regard. He observes that the university sector is currently struggling with “how to frame teaching, learning and inquiry in the professional practice fields”, which he describes usefully as “those organised human endeavours such as teaching, business management, public planning and administration, social work, counselling, nursing, allied-health endeavours, and so on” (Schwandt 2005:313). He contextualises this struggle within new forms and intensities of managerialism, and also the rise into prominence of what is variously called “science-based” or “evidence-based” practice and policy.

Teachers’ professional practice is about teachers’ professional development, thus teachers’ learning, learning how to learn, and transforming their knowledge into practice for the benefit of their students’ growth. Teacher professional learning is a complex process, which requires cognitive and emotional involvement of teachers individually, or collective capacity and willingness to examine where each one stands in terms of convictions and beliefs and the

perusal and enactment of appropriate alternatives for improvement or change (Avalos 2010:12). As far as teachers' professional practice is concerned, they acquire and generate knowledge, and also disseminate the knowledge to the learners in and outside the classroom. This standard covers the requirements for reflecting critically on the teachers' practice, establishing professional learning goals, planning and undertaking learning and development and participating in the extended professional community. Teachers' professional practice is put into five categories that include: knowing the students' level of understanding, the Knowledge of Content, Planning, Delivery, and Assessment of Instruction.

Teachers should understand what teaching (literacy and numeracy) is all about. In doing so, there is a need to reclaim the concept of teaching. Morrow's position is that in order to understand what teaching is, focus should be turned to the manner in which a teacher enables learners to learn.

IV. DISCUSSION

Implications of practice for a foundation phase classroom

First, teaching cannot be viewed as the transmission of knowledge from enlightened to unenlightened; rather, teachers act as "guides on the side" who provide learners in the foundation phase with favourable opportunities to learn.

Second, if learning is based on prior knowledge, then teachers must note that knowledge and provide learning environments that exploit inconsistencies between learners' current understandings and the new experiences before them.

Teachers can also encourage group interaction, where the interplay among participants helps individual learners become explicit about their own understanding by comparing it to that of their peers.

Fourth, if new knowledge is actively built, then time is needed to build it. Ample time facilitates learner reflection about new experiences, how those experiences line up against their understanding, and how an improved view of the world might be provided by different understandings.

A professional teacher today is required to demonstrate an increasingly large repertoire of personal as well as professional qualities, knowledge, skills and understandings. These qualities cannot easily be identified and developed by just one form of learning, for example, university based learning or school based learning.

For this reason, professional practice knowledge should be analysed as representing more than individual qualities. Professional practice knowledge is dependent on the interactions among certain individuals, in a particular context and within a certain structure. It is formed by history and tradition and by the universal qualities that are embedded in the tradition of the profession. It is formed by the values that are held and realized by the professionals.

In our understanding, intentions and values are important aspects of practice. What takes place in a school or university is to some extent formed by the educators' visions of what should and could be achieved. From a historical perspective, the consequences of certain practices may be good or bad. History can facilitate as well as hamper certain practices.

Practice is always *contextualised*; it cannot be thought outside of some notion of "context". There are always, unavoidably, contextual considerations and challenges in understanding and research professional practice.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, practice and for that matter teacher professional practice need to be viewed in a broader perspective to include a theoretical underpinning and important aspects of practice, such as personal value and identity as well as a historical and traditional consideration. Thus, the conceptualisation of the concept practice needs to be always looked at in both content and context. Theory and practice are related and each is essential to education and teacher practices; because the best theory is informed by practice and that, the best practice grounded in theory. We all need to do this for the foundation phase classroom.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important that the theory and concepts of good teaching practice be communicated to administrators as well as foundation phase teachers through on going, supportive professional development activities and literature.

University lecturers need to model these practices and provide supportive assistance to preservice and in-service teachers as they grapple with these practices in their daily endeavours.

Issues and concerns of teachers as they begin to make their transition to constructivist teaching need to be acknowledged and addressed through discussions, explanations of what to expect, practical suggestions, reassurance, and supportive understanding of teachers' concerns.

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