

## 5 1985 - An Analysis of an Individual's Educational Development: The Basis for Personally Oriented Action Research

My purpose is to draw your attention to the development of a living form of educational theory. The theory is grounded in the lives of professional educators and their pupils and has the power to integrate within itself the traditional disciplines of education. Educational theory occupies an ambiguous position in the educational profession. Its importance is due to the fact that a profession supports its skills and techniques with a body of systematically produced theory. On the other hand, teachers tend to decry educational theory because of its lack of relationship to their practical skills and techniques.

My purpose in writing this chapter is to outline how I think a professionally credible educational theory could be generated and tested from a form of self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in educational contexts in order to improve the rationality and justice of:

- (a) their own educational practices,
  - (b) their understanding of these practices,
  - (c) the situations in which the practices are carried out.
- 'It is most empowering when undertaken by participants collaboratively, though it is often undertaken by individuals sometimes in co-operation with "outsiders"'*  
(Kemmis and Carr, 1983).

I am assuming that a teacher action-researcher, who is interested in contributing to knowledge of the process of improving education within schools, will be faced by an academic community which will examine the legitimacy of the claim to knowledge. I am also assuming that a teacher-researcher is concerned to establish a direct relationship between the claim to know what he or she is doing and the pupils' educational development.

The educational analysis which follows is focused upon the nature of the validity of an individual action-researcher's claim to know his or her own educational development. The analysis outlines a form of educational theory which can be generated from professional practice and which can integrate the different contributions of the disciplines of education. Let me say at the beginning how I see the relationship between my own research and teacher action-research. In my work in a University I am paid to make scholarly and acknowledged contributions to knowledge of my subject, education. I characterize my attempts to make this contribution a form of academic action-research. In my investigation of my own claims to know my own educational development I have explored the nature of a form of educational theory which is directly related to educational practice. My particular concerns have focused upon the academic legitimacy of an individual's claim to know his or her own educational development. I think that my findings will be of use to those teacher-researchers who wish to justify their own claims to knowledge to the academic community.

The approach to educational theory I am suggesting we adopt, rests on a number of assumptions concerning both the idea of a 'living form of theory' and the personal and social criteria which can be used to criticize the theory. I use the term a 'living form of theory' to distinguish the suggested approach from the 'linguistic form' in which traditional theories are presented for criticism. In a living approach to educational theory I am suggesting that teacher action-researchers present their claims to know how and why they are attempting to overcome practical educational problems in this form:

I experience a problem when some of my educational values are negated in my practice.  
I imagine a solution to my problem.  
I act in the direction of my solution.  
I evaluate the outcomes of my actions.  
I modify my problems, ideas and actions in the light of my evaluations.

For educational theory to be directly related to educational practice it must have the power to explain an individual's development. One of the major problems which has led to the discrediting of traditional forms of educational theory was that they could not produce adequate explanations for the educational development of individuals. A theory should also be able to answer questions concerning why things happen. In the approach to educational theory advocated here the 'why' questions are answered in terms of 'value'. Like Ilyenkov (1982) I take 'value' to be a human goal for the sake of which we struggle to give our lives their particular form. In relation to the enquiry I take it that the experience of the negation of educational values moves the enquiry forward and that the values are taken, by the holder, to be concrete universal intent.

Questions concerning the academic legitimacy of a claim to knowledge are often focused upon the criticism of a particular piece of work. The work being criticized can be a single hypothesis of theory (Popper 1972) or a research programme (Lakatos 1972). Whatever is being criticized is known as the unit of appraisal. In criticizing a claim to knowledge it is important to be clear about the unit and the standards of judgment which can legitimately be used in the criticism. There is some dispute amongst philosophers about the nature of the standards which can be used to criticize a claim to knowledge.

The unit of appraisal in my conception of educational theory is the individual's claim to know his or her own educational development. Although this unit may appear strange to most educational researchers I think that it is clearly comprehensible. The standards of judgment are however more difficult to communicate. I use both personal and social standards in justifying my own claims to know my own educational development. In using personal criteria I draw upon the work of Michael Polanyi. I am grateful for *Personal Knowledge* (1958) because in my case Polanyi fulfilled his purpose of '*stripping away the crippling mutilations which centuries of objectivist thought have imposed on the minds of men*'. The personal criteria I use in

making a claim to know my own educational development include Polanyi's values of respect and commitment.

*To claim validity for a statement merely declares that it ought to be accepted by everyone because everyone ought to be able to see it . . . The affirmation of a scientific truth has an obligatory character; in this it is like all other valuations that are declared universal by our own respect for them. (Polanyi and Prosch, 1975)*

*It is the act of commitment in its full structure that saves personal knowledge from being merely subjective. Intellectual commitment is a responsible decision, in submission to the compelling claims of what in good conscience I conceive to be true. It is an act of hope, striving to fulfil an obligation within a personal situation for which I am not responsible and which therefore determines my calling. This hope and this obligation are expressed in the universal intent of personal knowledge.*

*. . . Any conclusion, whether given as a surmise or claimed as a certainty, represents a commitment of the person who arrives at it. No one can utter more than a responsible commitment of his own, and this completely fulfils his responsibility for finding the truth and telling it. Whether or not it is the truth can be hazarded only by another, equally responsible commitment. (Polanyi, 1958).*

In grounding my epistemology in *Personal Knowledge* I am conscious that I have taken a decision to understand the world from my own point of view, as a person claiming originality and exercising his personal judgment responsibly with universal intent. This commitment determines the nature of the unit of appraisal in my claim to knowledge. The unit is the individual's claim to know his or her own educational development.

The social criteria I use to criticize my claim to knowledge appear to conform to Habermas' view on what claims to validity I am making if I wish to participate in a process of reaching understanding with you. Habermas (1979) says that I must choose a comprehensible expression so that we can understand one another. I must have the intention of communicating a true proposition so that we can share my claim of knowledge. I must want to express my intentions truthfully so that we can believe what I say. Finally, I must choose an utterance that is right so that we can accept what I say and we can agree with one another with respect to a recognized normative background. Moreover, communicative action can continue undisturbed only as long as participants suppose that the validity claims they reciprocally raise are justified.

From this I take it that the action-researcher has a responsibility to present a claim to knowledge for public criticism in a way which is comprehensible. The researcher must justify the propositional content of what he or she asserts, and justify the values which are used to give a form to the researcher's life in education. The researcher must be authentic in the sense of wanting to express his intentions truthfully. Habermas says, and I agree, that a claim to authenticity can only be realized in interaction:

*'in the interaction it will be shown in time, whether the other side is "in truth or honestly" participating or is only pretending to engage in communicative action'.*

The personal and social standards I use to judge the academic legitimacy of my claim to knowledge are the values I use in giving my life its particular form in education. In judging my own claim to educational knowledge I use the following logical, scientific, ethical and aesthetic values. In such a brief space all I can hope to do is to sketch out the general principles of my position and to draw your attention to the locations where the position is being worked out in more detail in practice. The most difficult problem to be overcome in presenting my ideas to others in a comprehensible way concerns the logic of my position. As a dialectician I am aware of the attacks on dialectical logic by such eminent Western philosophers as Karl Popper. Popper (1963) dismissed the use of dialectical logic in the presentation of theories as based on nothing better than a loose and woolly way of speaking. His case rests on the way he thinks about contradictions. The point at issue has been clearly put by Ilyenkov. (1977).

*Contradiction as the concrete unity of mutually exclusive opposites is the real nucleus of dialectics, its central category . . . but no small difficulty immediately arises as soon as matters touch on 'subjective dialectics', on dialectics as the logic of thinking. If any object is a living contradiction, what must the thought (statement about the object) be that expresses it? Can and should an objective contradiction find reflection in thought? And if so, in what form?*

Formal logicians such as Popper (1963) hold that any theory which contains contradictions is entirely useless as a theory. This view is based upon a linguistic presentation of theory. In this paper I am drawing your attention to the locations (Note 1) where a living form of educational theory is being produced. The theory is embodied in the lives of practitioners who exist as living contradictions. The inclusion of 'I' as a living contradiction within a theoretical presentation creates problems if we attempt this presentation in a purely propositional form because the propositional logic holds that we cannot have two mutually exclusive statements which are true simultaneously.

In my own development I am conscious of attempting to overcome the experience of myself as a living contradiction in order to minimize the tensions between, for example, values negated in practice and the current practice. I am also conscious of the need to give a form to my life and of the need for meaning and purpose. If I attempt to describe my development in a purely propositional form I will fail to communicate my meaning because of the existence of 'I' as a living contradiction in my development. The central problem is how to present a dialectical claim to knowledge in a publicly criticizable form. My own presentation is in the form of ten research reports (Whitehead 1982) produced over the past ten years as I have explored my existence in terms of 'I' as a living contradiction in the School of Education of the University of Bath. I would also draw your attention to the work of colleagues and students of mine, past and present, who are struggling in a similar way to improve the quality of education (see Note 2). By drawing your attention to

where the theory is being generated and tested in practice, I hope to emphasize that it is being generated and tested in practice, I hope to emphasize that it is embodied in the form of life of practitioners rather than existing in a propositional form within textbooks on library shelves.

This is not to deny that the propositional form can have significance for the genesis of educational theory. On the contrary the standards I use to justify my claim to know my own development as a scientific form of life are drawn from Popper's (1972) views on the logic of scientific discovery. The main difference between the traditional view of educational theory and the dialectical approach is that the traditional view was presented in a propositional form which excluded dialectical logic. The dialectical approach is presented in terms of the forms of life of individuals in education and shows how propositional forms exist within the forms of life.

In using Popper's work I check to see whether or not the claim to know my own educational development conforms to the cycle of experiencing and formulating problems, imagining a solution, acting on the imagined solution, evaluating the outcomes and modifying the problems and ideas. This capacity of the dialectical approach to integrate within itself the insights from a propositional form is what gives the approach its power to integrate the concepts of the disciplines of education. I think that this power rests upon the imaginative capacity of individuals to relate the concepts to their practical concerns. For example as the individual encounters personal and social constraints in his or her attempts to improve the quality of education in schools, the concepts from the psychology or sociology of education might prove useful in helping to overcome the barriers to improvement. The form I suggested above for the presentation of our claims to know our own educational development has the capacity to allow the inclusion of the concepts from the disciplines of education whilst being itself irreducible to the form of any of the present disciplines of education.

As the individual presents a claim to educational knowledge the academic community will be able to judge whether or not the work demonstrates an understanding of contemporary accounts in the different disciplines of education. It might also be the case that the claims to educational knowledge could point out deficiencies in the present state of development of the disciplines of education.

Because of a desire to give a correct account of the nature of educational theory I want to hold up the value-laden nature of my claim to knowledge for public criticism. I want you to understand and accept for good reasons, the normative background of my ethical values.

I recognize a major problem, almost as great as the problem of contradiction, as soon as I attempt to communicate the ethical values in my claim to know my educational development. The problem is grounded in the principle known as the autonomy of ethics. This principle, usually attributed to Hume (1738) and upheld by linguistic philosophers, holds that statements of value and statements of fact form logically independent realms of discourse. In my educational development matters of fact and

matters of value are integrated in my experience of practical problems of the kind, 'How do I improve this process of education here?'. How then do I present a claim to know my educational development in a way that truly represents this integration?

I can talk about the ethical values I use in making decisions which give a form to my life in education. I can use value-words such as those of consideration of interest, worthwhile activities, respect for persons and democratic forms of social control (Peters 1966). The meanings of my ethical values are however embodied in my educational practice. Their meanings emerge in the course of my attempts to overcome their negation (Feyerabend, 1975). In order to communicate these meanings I think that it is necessary to present visual records of that practice. I must show you where I am experiencing the denial of my educational values, give a public formulation of my problems in terms of the denial and I must present a programme of activities which I believe will overcome the denial. I must show you my actions and hold up my evaluations of those actions for your criticism. In this way it is possible for an individual to hold up a claim to know his or her educational development as an ethical form of life for public scrutiny. The individual can thus generate a personal form of educational theory and submit it for public test.

However, since the meaning of values cannot be expressed in a purely linguistic form of discourse, they must, as I have said, be shown in action. Hence, it will be necessary for whoever is validating the claim to knowledge to use ostensive, as well as linguistic, criticism, in judging this aspect of the claim to knowledge. In judging the legitimacy of a value-laden claim to knowledge the individual is faced with the problem of justifying one set of values against another. In recent Islamic publications (Abdullah 1982), for example, the Western view of democracy has been declared inimical to educational theory viewed from an Islamic perspective. My own justification for my educational values is grounded within Polanyi's view of personal knowledge. Given that I am using a particular set of values in attempting to give my life its particular form in education, I am committed to examining the implications of attempting to overcome the experience of the negation of these values, in a way which fulfils Habermas' views on the validity claims I must fulfil if I am to reach an understanding with you. If our values conflict it seems to me inevitable that we are engaged in a political struggle. Conflict is most intensive when particular forms of life cut across those of others to the extents of one form negating the value-laden practice of another.

In the justification of a claim for scientific status for the individual's claim to know his or her own educational development I advocated the use of criteria from the work of Popper. To judge the logical status of the claim I suggested the use of a dialectical logic based on the work of Ilyenkov. To judge the ethical status I explained that my values were embodied in practice and that public criticism of the ethical base of my claim would require a form of ostensive criticism in which I must present visual records of my practice. I recognize that the cultural relativity of ethical values presents a serious problem for educators in a multicultural society who are asked to justify their own educational values. How the problem is being resolved must be shown and criticized in practice.

The final criterion is concerned with the notion of authenticity. This is a difficult concept to define because I think of education as a form of art in the sense that the individual is attempting to give a form to his or her life in a way which does not violate the integrity of other individuals. The aesthetic standard I use in judging the authenticity of the claim to knowledge requires an approach I have termed, following Holbrook (1979), 'indwelling'. Its use involves an ability on the part of the reader to empathize (through written, aural and visual records) with another individual's form of life as it is presented in a claim to knowledge and, through 'delicate intuitions, imagination and respect' (Russell, 1916), to judge whether or not the form of life can be seen in terms of the quality of human relationships in which the unity of humanity appears to be possible.

Just as the artist attempts to give a form to his or her material, so teachers, who are practicing the art of education, are giving a form to their own lives in education and assisting their pupils to do the same. When the artist presents his or her work, the appreciation of it will come as the viewer spends time 'reliving the work of its creator' (Lipps in Holbrook, 1979). In a similar way, in judging the aesthetic form of a claim to know another individual's form of life in education, the reader must attempt to identify with the process in which that individual struggled to give a form to his or her life in education. In affirming or rejecting the claim to knowledge as embodying an aesthetic form of life it is necessary, I think, for the reader to judge whether the quality of the actions presented in the claim to knowledge has violated the integrity of an individual or the unity of humanity as a whole. I say this because education has, for me, significance not only for its personal influence but also for its role in the world as a whole.

In offering the unit of appraisal and the standards of judgment which I think can be used by educational action-researchers to establish the academic legitimacy of their claims to knowledge I wish to emphasize that the logic of education proposed by Hirst and Peters (1970) is mistaken:

*' . . . facts are only relevant to practical decisions about educational matters in so far as they are made relevant by some general view of what we are about when we are educating people. It is the purpose of this book to show the ways in which a view of education must impose such a structure on our practical decisions.'*

In my view of educational theory the theory is essentially transformatory. Structures may exist in the process of transformation but they must not be *imposed* on the individual. The idea of imposing a structure is inconsistent with the view of educational knowledge proposed above. I would remind readers that they should always bear Polanyi's point in mind and approach their own claims to knowledge in a creative and critical way as individuals who have made a decision to understand the world from their own point of view, and who are claiming originality and exercising their judgments with universal intent. For the sake of the development of the profession of education they should also feel obliged to offer their claims to knowledge in an open forum for rational criticism.

Every educational action-researcher has a part to play in the development of the profession. Teacher action-researchers must be prepared to make public the educational theory which is embodied in their practices. Academic action-researchers must be prepared to help to establish the standards of judgment which are appropriate for judging the validity of such claims to knowledge. Administrator action-researchers must be prepared to show in what sense their activities are sustaining or improving the quality of education with the pupils in their institutions. My own work is concerned with assisting teacher action-researchers to justify their professional claims to know what they are doing through the provision of standards of judgment which themselves can stand the test of public and rational criticism. One reason for writing this Chapter is the hope that it will lead you to contact some of those action-researchers who are participating in the programme or who are described in the bibliography and notes. Through such contact we hope that a shared form of educational theory will be generated and tested in our professional practices. We believe that this will lead to improvement in the quality of education in our educational and other social institutions.

## Notes

### 1 *The Need for a Conference*

The past five years have seen an upsurge in the potential of action research as a way of relating practical and theoretical work in education, and thereby improving the quality of classroom learning. A number of our higher degree students have submitted dissertations using an action research approach and an increasing number of students are registering with us because of the work we do in this area. Because of the work either completed or in progress we are not able to organize a one-day conference which we hope will bring teachers, academics and administrators together. We hope to develop a network of action researchers and also to contribute to in-service days and to DES courses which could help teachers to explore the nature of their educational practice.

2 The ideas in this Chapter have developed over a number of years through the collaboration, criticism and support of colleagues and students. In particular I have benefited from the support of Dr. Cyril Selmes and Mary Tasker in the School of Education at the University of Bath and from the unpublished Masters Degree dissertations, listed below, of students who have worked with me to improve the quality of education in both theory and practice.

BARRETT, M. (1982) *'An approach to the in-service professional development of teachers'*, University of Bath.

FORREST, M. (1982) *'The teacher as researcher - the use of historical artefacts in primary schools'*, University of Bath.

FOSTER, D. (1982) *'Explanations for teachers' attempts to improve the quality of education for their pupils'*, University of Bath.

GREEN, B. (1979) '*Personal dialectics in educational theory and educational research methodology*', University of London.

HAYES, G. (1980) '*An investigation of educational practice in the classroom*', University of Bath.

PETERS, C. (1980) '*Research into the evaluation of youth work*', University of Bath.

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For the third time I am going to ask you to identify with my experience of existing as a living contradiction. On the 1st May 1987 I had to appear before a disciplinary hearing which was chaired by Mr. Richard Mawditt, the Secretary and Registrar. It met under the authority of the University Council to hear complaints from Professors Austwick and Thompson about my activities and writings. You will see that it is claimed by Mr. Mawditt on behalf of the University that my activities and writings are a challenge to its present and proper organisation and not consistent with the duties the University wish me to pursue in teaching or research. This claim and the power of the University which backed it, mobilised a most ferocious response in me. I felt disgust towards those two professors and outrage at the procedures which permitted an academic's work to be judged by a group which contained no academic. I was moved by the experience to extend my cognitive range and concerns further into the work of Alastair MacIntyre, Richard Bernstein, Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas. The force of this third experience in existing as a living contradiction marks a transformation in the story of my educational development. Whilst I am still motivated primarily by a concern to reconstruct educational theory I now begin to ground the analysis of my educational development in a relationship between the traditional, propositional forms of academic knowledge, represented in my papers, and in my understanding of my form of life as a living contradiction in the workplace. Before I explored the implications of this transformation in the 1990 and 1992 papers below, I published a paper on creating living educational theories from questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?'. I have been delighted to examine a number of higher degrees in other Universities which have acknowledged the value of this idea of a living educational theory. This delight followed my fury at being subjected to the pressures below.