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On good intentions and the juxtaposition of educational practices

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ABSTRACT: This article offers a reflection on the relationship between theory and practice in education, facilitated through a professional account of an early career researcher graduated from Leeds and living in Mexico. The account briefly narrates the initial experiences and some crucial learning the researcher had whilst completing her PhD degree. She also shares two significant post-PhD work experiences which stimulated her critical reflection on how educational practices communicate and influence each other. The description of these experiences leads to a short analysis of the relationship between educational theory and practice, identifying the overlap of practices as a crucial meeting point in this relationship. The latter is helped by the reflection of the author upon the work of Wilfred Carr and Stephen Kemmis, choosing a few ideas from their writings on educational theory and action research to explain her thinking.

Good intentions

I had a clear intention in mind when I decided to study a PhD in education: to use research to improve the environmental education teaching practices of primary school teachers. As a research assistant, I learned that often the overall purpose of educational research projects was to support students' learning by targeting an educational practice that could be better understood and, therefore, improved. Similar intentions defined my PhD research back in late 2013; in my head, it seemed obvious and straightforward to use research to help improve teaching practices. At the time, I perceived my intentions appropriate and perhaps even honourable. Yet, eventually, my intentions started to remind me of a popular aphorism which admonishes that 'the road to hell is paved with good intentions' or 'de buenas intenciones está empedrado el infierno' ('Hell is cobbled of good intentions') — as I often hear it in Mexico. Regardless of the religious connotation of the aphorism, many find sense in this phrase because it prompts us to be critical of our intentions and the potential consequences of enacting them.

I suspect that the initial intention of my PhD might have added another cobble to the miscommunication netherworld that exists between educational theory and practice... between academic research and teaching. How did I know my research participants would share or assume my intentions? It was a good intention to want to contribute towards improving environmental education, but I am not sure how 'good' it was to assume that research, my research in this case, is a directly relevant source of learning for teachers. I realised that 'good intentions' are not good enough to improve educational practices or to strengthen the relationship between research and educational practices. For instance, 'good intentions' such as using research to improve an educational practice, depending on the research design, could fail to consider the influence of teachers' epistemologies. Nowadays, the 'good intentions' I

had when I started my PhD do not seem ‘good’ enough to me as they did before. I realised the improvement of education is beset with ‘good intentions’, many of which do not bring research and teaching closer together.

What my PhD studentship did not teach me

I did not study to be a basic education teacher, but I understood what the profession entails mostly by spending some significant time talking and working along teachers in research—my own mother was a devoted preschool teacher. When I fully dived into educational research at the University of Leeds through a PhD programme, teachers and their practices further puzzled me. At Leeds, I mulled over the notions of teacher identity (e.g. Beijaard, 1995; Coldron and Smith, 1999; Gee, 2000). At some point, I got busy untangling the differences between teacher beliefs (e.g. Kagan, 1992; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 1996) and knowledge (e.g. Calderhead, 1996; Clandinin, 1985; Shulman, 1987; Verloop, Van Driel, & Meijer, 2001) until I decided that this was not helping my study or me. So, I concluded my explorations with a broader outlook of teacher cognitions and an assortment of aspects that might influence their teaching practice (Borg, 2015). Leeds, Hillary Place, were surely great places to learn more about how to contribute towards improving teaching practices in environmental education, even if these places did not have a strong research body in this field.

The PhD training at Leeds often encouraged interdisciplinary exchanges between students of different faculties. Their training formats and the support to carry out student-led activities and events enhanced these exchanges. We were also encouraged to think hard on our role as researchers, for instance, challenging and inspiring our understanding of reflexivity in qualitative research (i.e. Berger, 2015; Seale, 1999; and Smartt, 2016). Moreover, the research culture in Leeds pushed me to become competent at communicating with policy makers — a high level competence that requires ongoing motivation and practice. The aforesaid opportunities, alongside my studies, made me feel like I had consolidated my research interests and practice as an educational researcher. Nevertheless, once I was back to an academic work life in education, I realised that there were other significant aspects left for me to consolidate.

After completing my PhD, I pondered the tired and perhaps dull question of “how do teachers and educational researchers work together-together?” I was puzzled by “how can the relationship between educational researchers and teachers evolve beyond the centrality of research findings?” Or, how can research be assumed in teaching and the other way around? Was participatory action research the closer answer? All this and more was left for me to figure out. It was my responsibility to recognise the gaps between theory and practice. In the following section, I will narrate a personal account of two recent academic experiences that illustrate how I arrived at these questions.

A juxtaposition of practices

It had been less than a year after finishing my PhD in 2018 when I was lucky enough

to find myself back in Mexico and having new academic work experiences. These academic experiences include doing two very different jobs at two strikingly different research institutes. At the centre of these experiences were basic education teachers, teacher educators, and educational researchers. To be true, I was a peripheral spectator rather than an actor playing a central role in these scenarios. My marginal participation was deliberate, but also constrained by both my lack of practical experience in teacher education and the power differentials of these places. The first experience I describe happened in an institute led by researchers, including educational researchers. The second experience took place in a teacher education research institute. Both institutes had developed educational research for over ten years, thus, they were fairly new institutions. Together, these experiences portray the relationship between research and educational practices in a contrasting way.

Researchers leading teacher education practices

Working at an interdisciplinary institute led by researchers is one of the most enriching work experiences I have had; it was great to experience research beyond my area of expertise. In this place there were highly experienced researchers of different fields 'walking about', weekly seminars led by students and researchers, an atmosphere of true respect for productive academic work, a general attitude showing little stress over social protocols and dress codes. The main requirement there was to effectively and ethically contribute to whatever research you were involved in.

At this place, I was working as a postdoctoral scholar in a new researcher-led programme that was aimed at the professional development of in-service science schoolteachers. The research group and the structure of the selective programme provided learning experiences that the curriculum and the diversity of the people enrolled maximised. Teachers working at any of the basic education levels (the equivalent of early years to Key Stage 5) and from different places in Mexico and other countries could enrol in the programme. Likewise, the experienced team of researchers grouped several accomplished partners across Mexico and from other Latin-American countries. The vast experience of the leading researchers in didactics and teacher education was another significant benefit for the teachers who enrolled in this programme. The enrolled teachers were, perhaps like never before, directly exposed to scientific and educational research practices whenever they visited or studied at the institute.

A distinctive aspect of this experience is that those full-time educational researchers were now performing as teacher educators daily, seemingly different to their experience on delivering workshops, guiding postgraduate students and teaching isolated modules. When I arrived at this programme, there was a keen interest amongst the researchers of the group to guide the student teachers through a systematic analysis of an innovative teaching lesson they had designed themselves. There was a lot of discussion between the members of the research group about how to do this guiding. At the same time, there were a few foundational problems to deal with, such as the data collection processes that the teachers had conducted

during the creating and testing of their innovative lesson. Most of them had incomplete sets of data or had data retrieved/generated from poorly designed instruments. From this point onwards, I started paying close attention to the teachers' reactions to these types of obstacles and the shifts in practice that were taking place in the teacher-researcher interactions.

I noticed that gradually, research theories and practices took over the thesis development of the teachers. This meant that the teachers' reflection processes were being guided by strategies of educational research, contrasting with the style the teachers used to innovate their practice. I was not sure if 'the research-way' was an entirely suitable approach to conduct the analysis and to report the teachers' innovative proposal. I was curious about how a teacher's practice would actually benefit from transcribing interviews or creating a data balance. Also, I could not fully grasp the knowledge and methods that were privileged in this programme. How were theory and practices each informing the actions taken? My opinion is that the researchers and teachers were mildly unaware that they got caught up in a theory-practice dilemma or even worse! The paradigms of a research practice were attempting to shape the practice and learning processes of the student teachers. To me, this situation was mind-boggling. I could perceive an issue with how these research and teaching practices were 'mis-communicating', but I did not have an answer for this problem.

Teacher educators leading research practices

Eventually, in less than a year, the wind of change took me to a teachers-led research institute, where the continuous professional development of teachers was the focus of attention. By teachers-led research institute, I mean that former schoolteachers and teacher educators of long-standing careers made most of the numbers in this place. Although, this place was run by managers of varied backgrounds, often chosen based on external selection processes. The Rector of the institute did not have to be a teacher educator neither an educational researcher. The research culture of this place was not as strong as their teacher education culture. This place had strong institutional bonds with the local Secretariat of Education and other institutions across different social sectors. The strategic infrastructure of this institute combined teacher education, research, and technological development and design for the improvement of local educational practices. The formality of this place was contrasting to the relaxed protocols in the other research institute. The organisational culture of this place resembled the general culture of the state-funded teaching institutions in Mexico.

When I took on a new research position in the teachers-led institute, new frameworks were being adopted and the concept of educational practice was at the centre of the institutional reformulation. In fact, it was at this place that a prominent teacher educator introduced me to the ideas about educational theory and practice that I will discuss further ahead in this text. At that moment, the institute was searching for ways to create a strong research culture to improve the prominence of their contributions to educational research and local educational practices. The last few administrations struggled with establishing clear research areas, cohesive

research groups, and securing funding for research. I learned that in the past, their research projects mostly resembled educational interventions and political strategies, more than unbiased, exhaustive and relevant investigations. Previous research reports show there was a confusion on what it was an investigation or a research project. The systematic approach, methodological rigour, and ethical features typical of educational research were not clear in the research reports I got to read. There was a real need to leave the old habits behind and develop new research that served international standards as it contributed to local educational practices. This was almost the flipside of what I perceived at the other research institute: the theoretical and practical assumptions of a teaching culture were ruling their research practices.

The ways of planning, developing, and assessing research at this place seemed strikingly different from the other institute. Likewise, their approach to teacher education was mostly divergent to what I experienced at the other institution. By talking to the people there and learning about the previous work they did for teacher education, I realised that they were mindful of teachers' practices and their contexts. Their vast experience in teaching, teacher education, and educational management was intriguing to me. I could not fully understand the architecture of their practices in teaching and research. I was neither sure if the old research habits of this place were left behind nor if a vast majority noticed there was a strong bias in the way they conducted their research.

Paving a way for reflexive intentions: an ecology of practices

My appraisal of the two experiences narrated above is that there is no right or wrong in these situations; perhaps, the experiences that I narrated just represent an unfortunate, though well-intended, miscommunication of practices. The two experiences present an intricate dilemma relevant for educational researchers, school authorities, teacher educators, and schoolteachers. I do not think there is a right path to follow when two different practices need to 'understand each other', though, I found some 'initial leads' or answers to this in Carr (2002) and Kemmis and Wilkinson, Edwards-Groves, et al. (2014). The latter references are two texts written by a group of scholars who have been working for decades on educational philosophy and action research. Through them, I identify 'initial leads' on the relationship between theory and practice and on how different practices influence each other when trying to solve shared educational problems.

Using a persuasive argument, Carr (2002) contends that educational theory is originated within practice and by a particular practice; he rejects the notion that a theory can be 'applied' to inform, shape, and derive a practice. Carr meant that any educational theory created outside its field of action is only artificially relevant for educational practice. Therefore, the context of a practice and what we do in a practice both should inform the theories we use/create for the practice in question. Educational theories that aim to be effective are (ideally) created 'within' its field of action and credit educational practice with theoretical attributes. This is why theories created within the research arena might differ from the educational theories that emerge from teaching; this is partly why researchers and teachers have trouble merging their frameworks to collaborate. According to Carr (2002),

educational theory should aim to improve the rationality of practices by “critically evaluating the adequacy of the concepts, beliefs, basic assumptions and values that are part of the most outstanding theories of educational practice” (p. 58). I perceive the effectiveness of the theories underlying the practices of the two situations I describe in this text was compromised because dominant paradigms misled the rationality of their practices.

I do not have a clear idea of how the critical evaluation of the relationship between theory and practice that is suggested by Carr (2002) could look like in action. I do, however, understand that the theories and practices around an educational problem or educational event should work together to solve it. Practices inform practices, although Kemmis and colleagues (2014) would probably say it differently: how theory and practice relate is also the product of the “ecology of practices”. Based on the work of Fritjof Capra and his work on ecology and community, Kemmis and colleagues (2014) propose that ‘the sayings, doings, and relatings of a practice’ become the architecture that enables or hinders another practice (p.43).

My post-PhD experiences in the two research institutes brought the notion of ‘ecology of practices’ to life, although at the time I did not know what to call it. The two experiences I described in this text involve cultural systems of practice that are interdependent yet, in these examples, the practices and methodologies of a dominant culture imposed on another. In both examples, I identify there was an awkward ‘architecture’ hindering the effective merging of two different practices that share an educational purpose. Missing an open and critical assessment of the shared commitment to education weakened the theoretical and methodological strengths of the research and teaching cultures of the two places. Here, the key was in how the educational practices of each culture or ‘system’ interacted, suggesting that good shared intentions are not enough if the suitability of the theories, context, and actions that are being used to improve a practice are not openly agreed upon and studied.

In an introduction to Carr’s work (2002), Kemmis, from a Habermasian perspective, observes that social relations and structures, rather than theory alone, are the main drivers of professional practices. Kemmis discriminates individual and public processes of interaction that influence the relationship between theory and practice. My work experiences confirm the latter through examples of public processes and social structures which influenced the interactions and resulting work of researchers and teachers or teachers doing research for teachers. The organisation and negotiation that happened or the lack of public processes in these practices affected the collaborations between research and teaching. A silent theory-practice debate permeated their practices and shared commitment to education; this was a symptom of their mild disregard for the social relations and structures acting out in the ecology of their educational practices. This how I think distance between theory and practice and from practice to practice can divert ‘good intentions’, allowing long detours away from the educational problems at hand.

Some final thoughts

I perceive that much of my career path in education was informed by many ‘good intentions’, some of which were mine and some borrowed from others. This does not mean that I believe that all the students who devote years of their life to a PhD in Education are gullible and hold uncritical good intentions. In fact, many would already have a realistic picture of their field of interest by the time they start their PhD. Nevertheless, it can be difficult to identify the complicated ties of educational theory and practice. This involves the challenge of learning that knowledge exchanges in education have multiple sources and depend upon intricate social interactions. Besides, understanding the meeting points in the relationship between educational theory and practice is difficult regardless of your position, if you have been a teacher for a substantial period or if you have done a lot of academic work away from the demands of a classroom.

For many, the debate around the relationship between theory and practice is old, but for an early career researcher of Latin-American background it came as a surprise to find these treasures of discussion. Now, by no means do I trick myself into thinking this is a successful summary of the lifetime work of Carr and Kemmis or that my writing portrays the criticism that they have received (e.g. Misawa, 2011; Moore, 1981). Yet, I dared to present a rough sketch of my ideas because I hope these inspire others who are wondering about similar aspects or experiencing/witnessing comparable circumstances. I am sure that I will ponder the relationship of research and teaching for a long time; I will question if critical research approaches can sufficiently provide a framework for uniting these practices. These questions are important because our ‘practice’ demands us to task ourselves with the endless debates on the relationship between theory and practice. Engaging in debates on these matters might help us examine our ‘good intentions’ and turn them into productive actions to improve the communication of our educational practice ecosystem.

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