
Making Use of Theories about Literacy and Justice: teachers re-searching practice

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ABSTRACT This article considers teachers' work as they grapple with theories in practice in the everyday worlds of their classroom. It argues that Bourdieu's theory of practice and the concept of habitus may be useful in moving past theory/practice dichotomies. After establishing the historical context for teacher research in South Australia, the work of two school-based literacy educators with an overt social justice standpoint is explored. The complexity of teachers' intellectual work and identity formation over time is outlined and implications for teacher education are discussed.

Keywords: literacy; social justice; practitioner research; habitus; theory; classroom practice; professional identity; teacher-researcher

Introduction

This article explores the ways teachers make use of and work on theory to disrupt and ultimately improve everyday educational practice. I argue that teachers working on and with theory can and do generate new forms of educative practices in the field of literacy education, which are based on explicit standpoints towards social justice in specific localities. To make this case and to illustrate particular practices and effects, I draw briefly on my own history as a teacher, indeed as a teacher-researcher in the seventies; but mostly I refer to subsequent collaborative research with teachers and the work of two teacher-researchers. In using the phrase 'teachers working on and with theory', I am signalling my preference to avoid theory/practice dichotomies generally, and also to suggest the importance of teacher agency in regard to the production and use of theories. This article is informed by multiple theories, assembled over time in different professional roles and relationships to research. Those that I have made use of in my work with teacher researchers include models of action research and teacher research

(Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988), Foucault's (1983, 1984) constitutive theory of discourse, feminist theories of teachers' work (Acker, 1995; Weiler, 1988), and Bourdieu's theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Grenfell & James, 1998).

In writing this, I do as many teachers do, that is, theorise my practice as a researcher and educator, by analysing the historical and contemporary narratives of my work. I consider the discourses, which have produced teacher-researchers, including myself, since the seventies. In working as a teacher-researcher in the late seventies and with teacher-researchers since the mid-eighties, I have held on to an optimistic view that educational research could lead to educational reform, which might lead to the negotiation of social justice in particular school communities. I hold on to that optimism for local change, informed by post-structuralist scepticism, even now, despite the many important warnings of the impossibility of educational reform on a large scale.

Foucault (1983, 1984) argued that discourses were constitutive of the objects of which they spoke. Taking examples from discourses about the child, it is clear that recent times have seen the production of the 'at risk' child, the 'emergent reader', the 'disadvantaged child', the 'abused child', the 'learning disabled child'. The subject is simultaneously constructed in multiple, fragmented and contradictory ways, through different discourses. For example, 'the disadvantaged child' may be a product of economic, educational and sociological discourses. Struggles over naming practices such as these are highly political. Thus, the 'emergent reader' and the 'at risk child' may be tied to different discursive formations and different programme effects, which in turn call forth different ensembles of discursive practices and techniques on the part of the child-teacher pair. New naming practices produce new kinds of subjects, new kinds of knowledge are produced about them and new discursive practices are produced in order to manage them (Rouse, 1994, p. 97). Similarly teachers are subject to naming and disciplinary practices which constitute them (and their work) in particular ways, such as the Aboriginal Education Resource teacher, the Reading Recovery teacher, the grade one teacher and so on. The term teacher-researcher is interesting because it implies a subjectivity – as 'researcher' – that does not necessarily come with the job description.

It is teachers' orientations to theories and towards practices as sites of research that interest me here. I agree with Brodkey (1992) that teachers must be in the forefront of theorising what can be changed in schools and with what effects for different students. The mediation of theory in teacher education and teachers' work on and with theory are urgent research sites for literacy educators committed to making a difference for disadvantaged students:

The future of literacy education and research on literacy, however, relies not on language theorists, not on researchers, not even on teachers as researchers, but on teachers knowing theories and assessing their value on research on literacy. (Brodkey, 1992, p. 307)

Brodkey goes on to argue that 'teachers need to recover their right to conceptualise teaching and learning and hence to reform education from within' (Brodkey, 1992, p. 308) and suggests that ongoing analysis of the constitutive nature of discourse offers possibilities for interrupting discursive practices that are counterproductive to teaching and learning (Brodkey, 1992). As a researcher who works with teacher-researchers, my task is to consider how I might anticipate with teachers the different effects of our practices on different groups of students and which evaluative frames are useful in considering the effects of practices.

In South Australia a very strong tradition of teacher-research exists, historically emanating from many sources that overlapped and amplified the effects of each other and, in effect, build a discursive field around 'teacher research'. In the seventies, the language across the curriculum movement was pioneered in South Australia by Garth Boomer. He emphasised the intellectual work of teachers and the need for them to theorise their practice. This continued into the eighties with the influence of process-writing researchers (Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1986) and advocates of kid-watching and teacher inquiry (Jaggar & Smith-Burke, 1985). Simultaneously, the Early Literacy In-service Course built mini teacher research practices between unit activities into its professional development model for teachers. The Commonwealth-funded Disadvantaged Schools Program was built around a model of teacher-driven action research projects. Carr & Kemmis had published their *Becoming Critical: education, knowledge and action research* (1986) and a widely used guide for doing action research was also produced (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

When I began teaching at the University in the mid-1980s, I had already done classroom and community research as a teacher, and one of my first tasks was to put together a teacher-as-researcher unit. As well as the specific unit, most of the course was based around this model and typically teachers conducted classroom, work or community-based inquiries as a part of each subject in their course work. By the nineties in South Australia in-service courses conducted by the department of education, and by the universities in language and literacy teacher research became standard, rather than unusual practice. My point here is that teacher-research and action research had become part of the common professional discourse of teachers. With its familiarity, there were risks that its radical, disruptive and critical agendas for educational reform might be lost; that it might become simply a technical activity about methods and strategies; that teachers might become data collectors for bureaucratic purposes and so on. My colleagues and I have been very much aware of the critiques and warnings around action research. We are keen to preserve the emphasis on action research as political, theorised practice.

In this article I consider now how literacy teachers have worked with and on theory to knowingly disrupt their everyday practices as they research different ways of teaching literacy in diverse and low socio-economic communities. I discuss the work of two teacher-researchers who explicitly work with theories of literacy and theories of justice, and I outline

my own standpoint and dilemmas on theory/practice in educational research.

Teachers Who Work with and on Theory

In this section I outline what I mean by 'teachers who work with and on theory', why it is necessary to specify this, and why theory isn't a given of 'research' when teachers undertake it. I refer here to the research of two teachers, Jennifer O'Brien and Bronwyn Parkin.

O'Brien was an experienced teacher-researcher who recently retired from classroom teaching. She published many papers in collaboration with academics and as a single author, as well as co-authoring a book for teachers (O'Brien & Hole, 1996). O'Brien acted as a mentor in a teacher-researcher network, which I describe below. Parkin has conducted a number of small-scale action-research studies in her career (e.g. Parkin, 1997, 1998). In 1998, she completed an extended piece of classroom research for her Master's degree and then moved onto a commonwealth government funded school-based research project. She has published several papers and increasingly presents at conferences for teachers and educational researchers in her role as project officer in the Aboriginal Education Unit.

I can only highlight and illustrate here the complex and developmental nature of these two women teacher-researchers, though I hope to conduct at some point an extended longitudinal study of teacher-researchers, as I believe as a profession we know relatively little about this aspect of teachers' careers and what it contributes to the educational research community.

Jennifer O'Brien conducted several related studies over a period of almost a decade, investigating how early childhood teachers might negotiate a critical literacy curriculum with young children (Comber & O'Brien, 1993; Luke et al, 1994). Working directly with feminist and poststructuralist theories about the construction of gender, critiques of socially critical researchers of mainstream school literacies and theories of social justice, she sought to disrupt her pedagogical practices and to rebuild them differently. In the opening chapter of her Master's thesis, entitled 'Theory/Research/Practice Nexus', she wrote:

In this chapter I review the critically-based literature, linking theory, research and pedagogical change which inspired me to introduce a critical discourse analysis into my junior primary classroom; at the same time I discuss how the poststructuralist prediction of multiplicity, confusion, contradiction and possibility impacted on my research and pedagogical positions. (O'Brien, 1994c, p. 1)

Working with and making use of feminist, critical discourse analytic and post-structuralist theories in her everyday classroom practices, O'Brien changed her questions about texts to indicate both the construction of texts and the non-neutral gendered representations in texts designed for children

and for wider use in the community. Influenced by cultural studies, she also changed the texts she used in the classroom and by incorporating everyday texts, such as junk mail and the spin-off materials associated with television programs and movies, which children frequently access at home and in the broader community. Informed by educational research that suggested that teachers controlled most of the talk around texts and thereby ensured their own authorised readings, she changed the rules about who could speak about the texts and when, so that children were allowed to comment uninvited as O'Brien read to them. O'Brien avoided asking all the questions and evaluating each of the children's comments. She also changed the associated writing and drawing she asked children to do in order for children to write and draw from the position of text analysts:

I aimed to raise with my students questions about the versions of the social world, particularly the inequities in gender relations, constructed in and by their classroom texts.

I decided to problematise the authority relations between teacher and students which resulted in the teacher's textual reading being preferred to that of her students. (O'Brien, 1994c, p. 4)

As she made these changes, she deliberately took up the insights of theorists and researchers, and simultaneously she researched the effects of her changed practices from a critical feminist standpoint. She considered, for example, the different responses of boys and girls to the new literacies she was making available. These complex changes to practice are the result of considerable intellectual work with a repertoire of theories assembled in professional development provided by the education of girls unit, graduate studies in language and literacy, attendance at national and local conferences, and O'Brien's own extensive self-directed reading.

The story of O'Brien's research is beyond what I can hope to discuss fully here (but see O'Brien 1994a,b). I want now to summarise the theories O'Brien was working with and some of the effects of O'Brien's practices as a teacher-researcher. In changing her practices, O'Brien was simultaneously working with, and articulate about, theories about feminism, post-structuralism, classroom discourse, popular culture, social justice, critical literacy and more. As she explained in her dissertation:

I take a position as critical practitioner/researcher/student, looking back at the issues raised for me in feminist poststructuralist theory, feminist poststructuralist pedagogy. I reflect on how the action I took in my classroom was interwoven with my continued reading in my area of interest. At the same time I point to gaps I uncovered in theory and practice and show how I drew on a theory/practices nexus to investigate some of these gaps. (O'Brien, 1994c, p. 1)

As an experienced teacher she had assembled and worked on an ensemble of theories that she made use of in her everyday classroom life and which remade O'Brien's professional identity. As a researcher she documented and analysed her theories in action in a specific location at a particular time.

This multilayered and highly sophisticated approach to teacher-research is incredibly valuable to the educational community as it speaks to both academics and teachers. O'Brien published widely for teachers including broadsheets, exemplars for policy and curriculum writers. She was also videotaped in action for a documentary about teaching literacy in disadvantaged schools. She authored and co-authored, articles for refereed journals and wrote chapters for national and international books. She has spoken (and had her work spoken about) at local, national and international conferences. It has been cited significantly in the field of language and literacy education. Locally, I still regularly meet teachers who ask me if I know Jennifer O'Brien and who go on to tell me about how they have used her work. Clearly her work has had multiple catalytic effects and has been taken up in different ways.

What interests me here is the way her work demonstrates theories of practice in action and makes clear that teachers are 'social agents who orientate social practice and that practice is "a cognitive operation"' (Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 12). Often as Grenfell & James, following Bourdieu (1977) point out, this can result in reproduction as teachers are 'incorporate bodies who possess, indeed, are *possessed by* structural, generative schemes', which orientate practice, which is in itself 'structured and tends to reproduce structures of which it is a product' (Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 12, emphasis in original). Indeed, a great deal of educational research concerned with justice explains how such structures work to maintain injustices for groups of students, typically with well-intentioned teachers unaware of how such inequities are produced. The teacher habitus and professional discourses may ensure that such thinking and analysis remains unconscious.

However, there is relatively less research, which explicitly documents and analyses what occurs when teachers work with theories of justice informing/driving their everyday practice, and even less which is conducted and authored by teachers. I am not suggesting that simply working with such theories guarantees empowering results (Weiler, 1991; Ellsworth, 1992); rather, I am interested in the possibilities of teachers researching the effects of their theorised practices over time, where those theories of practice attend to social difference, where indeed the very habitus of the teacher changes over time. Such research might directly inform/change educational theorising.

Parkin's research investigated the participation and learning of Aboriginal students in literacy lessons, which were designed to be inclusive (Au, 1993) and build on children's funds of knowledge (Moll et al, 1992) and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1990), and where the pedagogies were informed by research on Aboriginal children's preferred participative repertoires (Harris & Malin, 1994). As Parkin puts it, her research:

examines how teachers and children 'talk into being' a literacy curriculum which is intended to be emancipatory and inclusive of children's home experiences, the issues they encounter, and how they deal with those issues. (Parkin, 1998, p. 5)

Parkin was originally interested in how different Aboriginal children within the one class responded to the curriculum and pedagogical opportunities she and a cooperating teacher made available during two units of work. In particular she wanted to explore how (and whether) the small group situations that they had set up to enhance the participation of the children who were reluctant to speak in the whole class, were making a difference, and how (and whether) the culturally relevant and student-centred topics (pets, grandparents), allowed children to bring their funds of knowledge to bear on the school literacy tasks facing them.

Parkin audiotaped and videotaped a number of the whole class and small group situations in order that she could analyse closely how different children were participating and how she was operating as their teacher in practice. Her interrogation of her data was informed by her readings of conversational analysis and ethnomethodology, and in particular the exemplary analysis of other literacy researchers who take the view that literacies are constructed through the everyday practices in actual classrooms (see, for example, Baker & Freebody, 1993; Freebody et al, 1995).

At first Parkin found it difficult to consider anything from the data, which she did not already know as a teacher of these children. That is, she interpreted the responses and participation of particular children as being evidence of what she had already suspected from 'being there', and from her historical knowledge and close relationships with the children. In one sense, she was blind to the data before her in that her theories about these children would not allow for alternative interpretations. However, using what she had learned from conversational analysis she began to reread the transcripts, to re-search her practice, asking different questions about what was accomplished by the extended classroom conversations between herself and the children, and between the children themselves. It was not that she ignored what she already 'knew' about the children or their ways of being in class, but that she began to see them as agents with their logic and rationality, attending to their intentions and interpretations of what was going on, rather than comparing what they did and said with what she had hoped or expected they would do and say. This allowed for very different readings of the case-study children. It also allowed Parkin to raise significant questions about theories of Aboriginal learning styles, which are currently highly influential in Australia. Parkin explains her position as a teacher-researcher, which allows for a localised situated and theorised account:

While there has been much theorising about Aboriginal children, particularly about their preferred ways of learning, or learning styles, there has been little research focusing on the urban

classroom, and classroom talk to investigate the assumptions underlying this theory as played out in situated practices. (Parkin, 1998, p. 5)

Parkin's research indicated the different ways of operating amongst the urban Aboriginal children in her classroom, including their different approaches to literacy learning and to their participation in classroom discourse. It also showed the significance of family and out-of-school relationships to the ways in which the children collaborated (or not) in the school context. It reminded her that the children, as well as the teacher negotiate and construct what will count as a group. As well, Parkin's close analysis of the children's talk, whilst working on the set tasks, which were designed to be inclusive and allow them to use their funds of knowledge, showed paradoxically that the topics (e.g. 'grandparents') had been 'schooled' (and all that implies about class, gender, race and location) in ways that excluded the experiences of many children in the class.

Parkin's research posed challenges to taken-for-granted best practice in Aboriginal education. She continued to explicitly inform her everyday practices with teachers and with students with her working theories. She led applications for research funding to educational government bodies, her school making use of her expertise by applying for and winning grants to conduct their own research. A large group of teachers at the school undertook a professional development course in using systemic linguistics in the classroom and several joined the teacher-researcher network. Another group are teacher-researchers on a project that investigated literacy, information technologies and social justice. In Parkin's school (at that time) the curriculum and pedagogical agenda were increasingly tied to research, which built the knowledge of the teachers. It was possible to see emerging a school-based organic teacher-researcher workforce continually theorising their practice. Parkin was one catalyst in a core group, which included the leadership team and other key teachers.

As was the case for O'Brien, Parkin's theorising was built on an explicit social justice agenda and she continually checked the effects of her practices on those children who need most the literacies she and her colleagues were teaching. They continued (beyond the discrete projects) to scrutinise their practices to check if and how their enacted theories worked (or not) for particular children. When things went wrong they didn't automatically assume that either they had gotten it wrong in practice or that they were working with incorrect theory. Such a diagnosis can lead to paralysis and/or circularity. There was recognition that enacted pedagogies, curriculum and their effects are always complex and require continual analysis. Parkin refers to Garth Boomer on the necessity of working with the provisional and contingent:

We should [not] think ... so precisely on the event that we lose the name of the action ... We must act in the end as if our provisional readings are correct and our action should be in the direction of what we provisionally believe to be most just,

constructive and ethically defensible. (Boomer, 1992, quoted in Parkin, 1998, p. 239)

The task here is to re-research theorised practice in order to check and change what happens in specific localised institutions, how that is understood and its effects.

Images of 'Practice' and Relationships with Practitioner Research

The brief accounts above condense long-term, complex and dynamic professional biographies in order to consider the question of practice and theory in teacher research. What Parkin and O'Brien do is not described by representations of practitioner research, which speak of 'translating theory into practice' or 'applying theory'. Clearly, these researchers are engaged in assembling and working on repertoires of theories, and inventing and re-inventing continuously reflexive practices in non-linear ways. However this is not *ad hoc* or eclecticism, rather it is a deliberate searching and taking-up of theoretical resources selected on the basis of ethical principles and local meaningfulness and utility.

Practitioner research is of course not always constituted in these ways. Teacher-research components may be built into the design of large-scale government funded curriculum development and assessment projects where the role of the teacher-researcher is limited to collecting pre-set data or to trialing curriculum material. Here, the teacher becomes the conduit for other agents, a research assistant of sorts. Yet naming this work as 'teacher-research' implies a democratic, consultative and inquiry process with practitioners which may or may not have been undertaken. The non-problematized use of 'teacher-research' can well lead to its misuse or even abuse.

Teacher-designed action research projects may be limited in different ways; they may involve investigations of the effectiveness of various techniques or strategies, in order to improve practice. Such investigations may, or may not, make explicit use of theory. I have no wish to set up hierarchies of practitioner research based on the density of overt theoretical references. Although my own practice in working with teacher-researchers is to connect them with theories of literacy as social practice and theories of social justice as they go about designing their research and to build the intellectual capital that counts in the educational research community. My intention here is to argue for research about teacher-research, which does not presume a generic teacher-researcher with a generic relationship to theory and the production of knowledge.

Over several decades I have been exploring teachers' curriculum and pedagogical work in disadvantaged schools in South Australia. In particular, I have focused on approaches that purport to address social justice and I have been a strong advocate of critical literacy – studies of language and power, representation and social action. To conclude this article I consider

what I have learnt from those studies, and from these two teachers in particular, that suggest implications for teacher education and ongoing professional development.

First, I believe that we urgently need to examine the ways we talk about and teach theories in university and other teacher education settings. We need to interrogate the ways we proclaim theories as truth, the ways we set up oppositions between theory and practice, and to generate serious conversations between teachers (and student teachers) about the limits and potential of various theories. Secondly, we need to be much more explicit about how and what particular theories 'mean' in actual sites of practice, how they allow productive and positive educational work or, alternatively, how they promote, indeed ensure inequitable outcomes. To do this kind of work teachers must not be tongue-tied when it comes to theory. Part of teacher education must be about producing a workforce who can articulate the competing theories circulating in the profession and examine the local effects of espoused theories in terms of policy and practice. Finally, teachers and teacher-educators need to be able to examine together educational theories along with broader social and political theories so that 'curriculum' and 'pedagogy' are contextualised, and not treated as somehow privileged from everyday life – both local and global conditions. When curriculum theories bracket out such matters as the local contexts of teachers' work, the effects of globalisation, the emergence of new forms of communication practices, for instance, inevitably blind spots are created with respect to social justice.

From O'Brien and Parkin, working with teacher-research networks and teacher-researchers enrolled in courses, I have become acutely aware that teacher-researchers assemble repertoires over time, layering theories one upon the other, sometimes acutely aware of the contradictions (sometimes not) and sometimes selectively reading, rereading and remaking an amalgam that allows them to explain and envision their work in productive doable ways. For teachers who foreground social justice, an ethical stance informs their readings of new policy and curriculum imperatives. Gee argues that we need to examine classroom literacy practices in order to see whether what is going on is 'ethical human discourse' (Gee, 1993, p. 292). He suggests two key steps: that discourses need to be scrutinised firstly to check if they harm someone else and secondly to check who they advantage over other people. However, these questions are not simple to answer in the day-to-day practices of schooling and different discourses provide different rationalities to questions about 'what is good for other people's children'. Nevertheless, simply asking such questions foregrounds a social justice grid of evaluation for teaching and learning. This in itself is a useful step. As Gee concludes: 'In the end we run out of words, and meaning is rooted finally in judgement and action' (Gee, 1993, p. 293).

Teachers' takes on educational theories and social justice are affected by their own habitus and social positionings. Their histories, and current personal and professional situations can impact on what they hear in theories and what they make of them. Bourdieu's theory of practice

suggests that 'human action is constituted through a dialectical relationship between individuals' thought and activity and the objective world' (Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 14). His theory explains how the habitus ensures that past experiences are dynamic and impact on present action. Yet the habitus is not static but changes over time. The concept of habitus has been very generative for thinking about the educational trajectories of students; it could also be brought to bear in theorising teachers' standpoints, practices, institutional locations and their relationships to the field of educational research. Longitudinal studies, which explore how teachers work with theories over time from early career onwards and retrospective analyses with late career, and recently retired teachers may give us a clearer picture of the ways teachers grapple with theories and how their participation in teacher-researcher communities contributes to their work over time.

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Theory and Practice in Action Research **some international perspectives**

Edited by CHRISTOPHER DAY, JOHN ELLIOTT,
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This book contains 16 articles from across the professions and from different countries which explore and examine the nature, purposes, processes and outcomes of action research, its importance to professional growth and the challenges of collaboration and change. Written by practitioners from schools and universities, health and social services, it provides a comprehensive yet focused critical appraisal which we believe is essential reading by all for whom lifelong learning is a key component of being and sustaining themselves as professionals.

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