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Theorising Practice in Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT

This thesis employs a case study approach to examine the educational theories and practices of early childhood teachers in New Zealand. The traditional conception of education as an 'applied science' is rejected in favour of a *praxis* account in which educational theory consists of the more or less consciously held beliefs, values and assumptions of practitioners as manifested in their practice. It is argued that theory and practice are mutually constitutive and dialectically related parts of a whole. However a review of the literature on early childhood teachers' beliefs reveals that educational theory has been largely conceptualised as a body of knowledge which teachers apply to their practice.

Following 80 hours of observation in two early childhood centres which focused on six teachers interactions with eight 4 year old children, interviews were conducted with teachers and children to explore their views of practice. Six case studies are presented in which the beliefs and practices of these early childhood teachers are examined and the nature of their 'operational theories' explored. In the main, teachers identified the psycho-social domain as their primary focus, with only two teachers making reference to cognitive development. Teachers described children as 'learning through activity' and most subscribed to a non-interventionist view of teacher role. However all teachers were found to explicitly teach socially appropriate behaviour, this being the focus of the majority of interactions. Teachers offered apparently contradictory accounts of play. It is argued that these reflected both their formal and intuitive knowledge and that it was the latter which informed their interaction with children.

Teachers' abilities to theorise their practice differed. While some offered full and relatively coherent accounts of the beliefs which informed their practice, most teachers 'operational theories' contained 'gaps' and apparent inconsistencies. While the problems associated with making peoples' beliefs explicit are acknowledged, it is also argued that early childhood education will be most effective when teachers transform their practice into *praxis* through critical reflection and attempts to resolve any such inconsistencies. The implications of this claim for teacher education are discussed and an interactive 'problem centred' approach proposed.

PREFACE

The present study arose firstly from reflection on my work as a supervisor of early childhood teachers throughout 1985, a position in which I encouraged others to implement curriculum innovations. My questions, initially about how to change practice, became focused on attempts to understand what this practice meant to the teachers I worked with. I came to understand resistance to change as reflections of a teacher's personal commitment to her practice, such commitment suggesting strong but often unexpressed beliefs about the educational process. I also came to suspect that explanations offered for some practices were not statements of genuine belief at all but rather statements which teachers perceived as legitimate within the prevailing 'free play' ideology.

I next found myself involved in the pre-service training of early childhood teachers in the institutional context of a College of Education. Research in my own classroom provided evidence that students' existing knowledge, constructed from life experience beyond the classroom, strongly influenced what was learned in courses of formal study. Like the teachers I had met earlier, these beginning teachers had powerful beliefs which influenced the way they made sense of each new idea they encountered.

It is from such a background that the present study was first conceptualised. It began with an assumption that the educational worth of children's experiences in early childhood settings would depend on the theories held by their teachers. Originally I intended to examine a set of theoretical propositions about young children's learning and development in the light of children's actual educational experiences. I proposed also to interview the teachers to ascertain their commitment to these propositions. My assumption was that the empirical evidence provided by the observational data would allow such propositions to be evaluated and that any 'gaps' between teachers' espoused beliefs and objective reality would be attributable either to the inadequacy of the beliefs or a problem in their application.

While it is this view that underpins much of the literature on teachers' beliefs and their relationship to educational practice, my fieldwork led me to question its adequacy. Thus this report is only peripherally concerned with questions of 'good practice' in early childhood settings. Rather it offers an alternative understanding of the theory-practice relationship, exemplifies this through six case studies and discusses the implications for teacher education.

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