

The Importance of Theory

By Elaine C. Johnson

In his keynote address at a recent California Council on the Education of Teachers Conference, Gary Fenstermacher observed: "There's nothing as practical as a good theory." The healthy tension between theory and practice in teacher education will never go away and shouldn't; it energizes the relationship between schools and institutions of higher education. It's a tension we will always feel. I see it as a powerful tension that teacher educators have accepted as a healthy part of the profession. In fact, I think of it as a strength. Teacher educators have learned to live with this tension, to live with the balance between the field and the academy.

What makes a good theory so practical? A good theory can have different levels, different perspectives, and different implications to help support and inform educational decisions. As a master teacher, I always told my student teachers, especially when they complained about not knowing how to do something in the classroom, to go back to theory, that the theory they'd learned in their preservice programs operated as a tool without which they couldn't do anything else. Without theory, they wouldn't know *why* they designed certain lessons or held particular goals for their students. Without theory, they wouldn't have any idea what had gone on before them, or how apparently unrelated historical events shaped what they did that day in that school. The practicality of theory reveals itself throughout one's teaching career.

In my experience, credential candidates well-

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grounded in theory design lessons and instructional units with much more coherence and elegance than their peers who lack theory but have equal subject-matter preparation. Theory forges the connection between pedagogy and subject matter. A solid theoretical grounding also prevents the “method *du jour*” mentality that too often allows or even encourages teachers to flit from portfolios to cases to journals to manipulatives to improvisations to whatever happens to be the fashionable thing to do in class that week. As student achievement outcomes have shown again and again, current fashion in pedagogy has little to do with solid student learning.

A national report last year expressed some concern that teacher educators had not identified preparing teachers in classroom management as a main objective of their job. Teacher educators came across as loftily unconcerned about the realities of the classroom and willing to throw new teachers to the lions without proper preparation for dealing with the rigors of schools today. But credential candidates coming into the profession fortunate enough to go through a planned program of preparation need that learning time to study foundations, educational theory, the wide range of effective practice, and child development and psychology.

It's the job of the field people, the directing teachers in schools—working with university faculty—to move the credential candidate from theory to practice. It has been pointed out that few other opportunities exist for aspiring teachers to learn about new ideas or the latest approaches validated by research. If teachers do all their preparation in the field, their opportunities for learning material unconfined by the demands of the field become limited. Beginning teachers enter schools and bring with them their new knowledge of theory, gain practical experience in exchange, and remind experienced teachers of the crucial role of theory. To strip teacher preparation of this mutually-informing process impoverishes all concerned.

But as much as we might embrace it, this tension between theory and practice continues to appear to others outside teacher education as indecision or weakness. As teacher educators move into the future, taking responsibility for a greater role in developing policy that affects their work, we all have to recognize that some outsiders, including some policymakers, don't understand this tension and frequently view it negatively. We must understand that some of their more egregious proposals result from that misconception.

No matter how soon or how completely consensus develops regarding the other nine areas of debate in teacher education that Alan H. Jones introduces in this issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly*, we will not soon see public agreement that tension between theory and practice serves teacher education well. Until teacher educators exercise enough political clout to prevent underprepared teachers, usually unfamiliar with important theory, from entering classrooms, and enough political voice to make clear the importance of theory and foundational study for all teachers, the struggle over supremacy between theory and practice will continue.