

LEONIE G HIGGS**THEORY IN TEACHER EDUCATION: STUDENTS' VIEWS****Abstract**

This paper investigates the views of Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students' of the theoretical component in one of the modules in their teacher education programme. In this module students are exposed to the following theoretical frameworks: Empiricism, Critical Rationalism, Feminism, Critical Theory, African Philosophy and Existentialism. The aim of this paper is to reveal the students' views about: the volume of their work in the module, themes covered in the curriculum for the module, the relevance of the content for a South African context, what aspects of the content they found most interesting and whether it was understandable. Students were also asked to rate their prescribed textbook for the module and indicate bibliographical detail such as home language and age. The responses of the students show that student teachers recognise the important role theory plays in Teacher Education.

Introduction and background

Philosophical discourse in South Africa about the nature of education, teaching and learning has always been fragmented. Traditionally, there have been those educationists who have worked within the context of a Marxist and neo-Marxist paradigm, while others have located themselves within the more general context of what may loosely be termed "democratic liberalism" which propogates the democratising of schooling and individual empowerment. Then there have also been those who have pursued their endeavours in the analytical philosophy of education tradition emanating from the Institute of Education at the University of London. In other instances, philosophical discourse on education has been characterised by a structural-empirical methodology which has directed the work of educationists at the universities of the North West and the Free State. However, during the apartheid years before 1994, philosophical discourse about the nature of education, teaching and learning was dominated by the theoretical framework, identified as Fundamental Pedagogics, which was seen to provide the foundational landscape for apartheid education in the form of the system of Christian National Education. As such, theory was regarded as a crucial element in the hegemony of apartheid education and underpinned much of the work that was done in Faculties of Education at the universities of Pretoria, South Africa and Port Elizabeth. Moreover, theory was seen to fulfill a prominent role regarding teacher education in South Africa as it provided teachers with the theoretical foundation required for their professional training.

Developments in South Africa after 1994, however, led to the dismantling of apartheid and the abandoning of the assumptions which underlie and support the ideology of Christian National Education. After 1994 Fundamental Pedagogics was removed from the curriculum and Philosophy of Education courses at, for example, the University of South Africa (UNISA) began to expose student teachers to different theoretical frameworks in education (Higgs 2000).

In the light of this background the present article sets out to emphasise that theory plays an important part in determining the nature of educational discourse which includes Philosophy of Education. Theoretical frameworks guide the research efforts of philosophers of education in the sense that theoretical frameworks determine the education problems that are addressed as well as the adequacy of proposed solutions to these problems. It is, therefore, important to have a general knowledge of the various theoretical frameworks that influence educational discourse because educational discourse is guided by one or more presupposed theoretical frameworks. This means that philosophers of education in their critical reflection on educational theory and practice need to be aware of, and familiar with, the different theoretical positions informing and shaping educational discourse. It is thus necessary for philosophers of education to study and analyse the theoretical assumptions that influence the nature of educational discourse in order to ascertain the impact of these assumptions on educational theory and practice.

For teachers and students of Philosophy of Education this critical exercise is also imperative in establishing why and how one should study Philosophy of Education. Six different theoretical frameworks that influence educational discourse in Philosophy of Education are identified, namely, Empiricism, Critical Rationalism, Critical Theory, Feminism, African Philosophy and Existentialism. Each of these theoretical frameworks determines the methods used to conduct research into education, as well as, the formulation of educational theory and practice, even in teacher education.

But worldwide, Philosophy of Education in the critical consideration of theory and practice, is increasingly being omitted from teacher education programmes (Barrow 1990; Laursen 2007). For example, at the University of South Africa (UNISA) the theoretical component of a module in the Honours BEd was recently removed from the programme for teacher educators. It is in the light of this situation, that this paper emerges in concerning itself with the views of Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students' at UNISA on the theoretical component of a module in their teacher education programme.

Aim of research

The aim of this paper is to critically review the perceptions of (PGCE) student teachers to the theoretical frameworks they were exposed to in their teacher education programme. The theoretical frameworks include:

- Empiricism: Empiricism has its origins in British and American philosophy. Empiricism claims that our most reliable knowledge comes from direct experience through the senses. (Higgs & Smith 2006(a):16; Higgs & Smith 2006(b):1-15)
- Critical Rationalism: Critical Rationalism encourages us to question everything we are told and to examine critically our own ideas. Critical Rationalism constantly asks: "How do we know this is true?" (Higgs & Smith 2006(a):30; Higgs & Smith 2006(b):94-109)
- Existentialism: Existentialism as a method of enquiry focuses on the following question: "What is the meaning of life?" Ignoring such an existentialist enquiry runs the risk of living what Socrates called the

“unexamined life”. The unexamined life, said Socrates, is not worth living. (Higgs & Smith 2006(a):42; Higgs & Smith 2006(b):124-126)

- African Philosophy: African philosophy is a complex response to Africa’s unique position in the world and human history. African philosophy challenges the arrogance of the West and asks the West to rethink its claim of cultural superiority. (Higgs & Smith 2006(a):54; Higgs & Smith 2006(b):82-93)
- Critical Theory: Critical Theory claims that all human societies, particularly large and complex ones, are corrupted and distorted by deep-seated power structures. These power structures influence the way we live, the way we think and, indeed the way we are. Critical theory claims that our first task is to thoroughly understand what these power structures are and how they operate – we should then work to dismantle these structures. (Higgs & Smith 2006(a):87; Higgs & Smith 2006(b):66-81)
- Feminism: feminism claims that the entire experience of “being human” has been seriously distorted by masculine domination and the marginalisation of women. Feminism claims that women have, and are, denied basic human rights, and that men have shown themselves to be unworthy leaders of the human race by repeatedly indulging in acts of war, violence and abusive power relations. (Higgs & Smith 2006(a):102; Higgs & Smith 2006(b):39-54)

Context

The duration of the PGCE programme is one year. It includes teaching practice at a school for a total of ten weeks. The students are placed at schools by the teaching practice office of the Department of Teacher Education at UNISA. The programme includes the following:

- Nine compulsory education subjects which includes Psychology of Education and Socio-Pedagogy, Theoretical Frameworks in Education and History of Education, Special Needs Education, Health, Safety and Nutrition, Management and Assessment, Reception Year and Foundation Phase Didactics, Reading /Writing/ Spelling: First and Second Language, Teaching Mathematics, Science and Technology and Visual Arts, Music and Movement
- Ten weeks Teaching Practice

The admission requirements for the PGCE programme is:

- Grade 12 or a Senior Certificate and
- A recognised Degree with one school subject at least up to 2nd year level and
- Two official languages on 1st year level
- All teaching practicals must be done in South Africa

The research design

A survey design was used to collect data. A questionnaire formed part of an assignment which students had to post back to the lecturer. Students had to respond to open and close ended questions. The research questions were:

- What is your opinion regarding the scope of the work covered in this module?
- What is your opinion of the themes covered in this module?
- What is the relevance for South Africa?
- What is the international relevance?
- How do you rate the textbook?
- What is your home language and age?
- What aspect(s) of this section did you find the most interesting?

Population and sampling

All 300 students enrolled for the module constituted the population and sample of the research. The questionnaire was sent to all 300 students as part of their study package. Students had to respond to the questions in the questionnaire and submit it as an assignment to the researcher who was the lecturer for the theoretical component of the module. 198 Questionnaires were returned.

Research method

This is reflective research because it determines the views of PGCE students about the theoretical component of one of the modules in their teacher education programme.

Data collection

In order to determine what the views of students were on the theoretical component in one of the modules in their teacher education programme, questionnaires were sent to all students enrolled for the module as part of an assignment.

The responses of the students as recorded in the questionnaires they completed were scrutinised and recorded for purposes of determining how they felt about the theoretical component in their teacher education programme.

Results

The data were analyzed manually and the following data were collected:

1. Bibliographical data indicated that 38 (19%) students' home language was an African language, 105 (53%) were English speaking, 52 (26%) were Afrikaans speaking, 1 (0.5%) European and 2 (1%) spoke another language as home language.

2. The age of students ranged from 104 (52%) students between the age of 20-29, 51 (25%) between 30-39, 31 (15%) between 40-49 and 10 (5%) students above the age of 50.
3. 169 (85%) of the students felt that the volume of the work covered in the curriculum was manageable and 155 (78%) indicated that the themes covered in the module were adequate. 119 (60%) regarded the content of the themes as being relevant to the South African context.
4. The prescribed textbook: "Rethinking our World" was also rated. 115 (58%) felt the prescribed textbook was understandable and 127 (64%) indicated that the book is acceptable. Only 5 (2%) students regarded the textbook as "poor" while 25 (12%) indicated that it was difficult to follow.
5. Students indicated that African Philosophy and Feminism were the most interesting aspects of the theory section of the module.

Discussion

Philosophy of Education is not just a matter of acquiring specific technical skills, adhering to an established paradigm or conforming to a set of methodological rules. It is more a matter of learning to interact with those ideological constructs which have guided the research efforts of philosophers of education, in order to evaluate their impact on education theory and practice. Philosophy of Education can therefore be said to be a critical and oppositional discourse for understanding, challenging and responding to problems in education. However such a critical and oppositional discourse is dependent on a theoretical astuteness which is able to critically appraise the concepts, beliefs, assumptions and values incorporated in prevailing education theories and practices. A basic feature of theory is that it seeks to emancipate teachers from their dependency on practices that are the product of precedent ideological constructs by developing modes of enquiry that are aimed at exposing and examining the beliefs, assumptions and values implicit in the theoretical framework through which teachers organize their experiences and practices. It is therefore argued that without the necessary theoretical astuteness, teachers will not be able to interact critically with those cultural, social and economic concerns which direct impact upon their classroom practice.

Conclusion

The results of this investigation reveal that students have a positive view concerning the theoretical component in their teacher education programme. This is an encouraging finding because it means that students registered for the PGCE acknowledge the critical role that theory plays in teacher education. Their positive responses indicate that they recognise the importance of theory for practice in that theory guides research, and determines the problems that are to be addressed in education practice, as well as, the adequacy of proposed solutions to these problems. This in turn means that they are aware of how different theoretical frameworks inform and shape practice and education policy. The acquisition of such an awareness is imperative in preparing teachers to reflect critically on their practice and the demands that society makes on them as educators in the classroom.

References

- Barrow, R. 1990. Teacher education: theory and practice. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 38(4):308-318
- Higgs, L.G. 2000. The transformation of a practice in Philosophy of Education. *The South African Journal of Education*, Vol 20.
- Higgs, P. (ed). 1995. *Metatheories in Philosophy of Education*. Heinemann: Johannesburg.
- Higgs, P. & Smith, J. 2006 (a). *Rethinking our world*. Juta: Cape Town
- Higgs, P. & Smith, J. 2006 (b). *Rethinking truth*. Juta: Cape Town
- Laursen, P.F. 2007. *Student teachers' conception of theory and practice in teacher education*. Paper presented at the Bi-Annual ISATT Conference held at Brock University in Copenhagen, Denmark from 4-6 July 2007.

Professor Leonie G Higgs
University of South Africa
higgslg@unisa.ac.za