

Theory as story: A framework for understanding and articulating the narrative of personal practice

by Diti Hill

In 1997 I shared an overview of theoretical perspectives with participants of a Teachers' Refresher Course on assessment in early childhood. Since then I have been invited on many occasions by diverse early childhood groups to retell the 'Theory Story'. This story is a fascinating, compelling, historical narrative of people's personal ideas about how infants and young children learn, and why, and increasingly about how, they might be taught. The detail in the story is both factual and subjective; it changes, rightly, with every telling. The story, in the tradition of all good stories, resides in my mind and has never been committed to print. I challenge all early childhood practitioners to retell the 'Theory Story' and, in the telling, to reflect upon their own unique relationships with young children and their whānau/families.

Over the past 10 years and since the educational reforms of the early 1980s in Aotearoa/ New Zealand, there has been an increasing emphasis on viewing early childhood practitioners¹ as professionals (Stonehouse 1994). Lilian Katz (1984), a noted American expert on early childhood issues during the 1980s and 1990s, contributed significantly to an understanding of the link between professionalism and theoretical perspectives by noting that a key aspect to professionalism was the use of advanced knowledge to both exercise professional judgement and maintain professional standards. In the Revised Desirable Objectives and Practices (DOPs) for Chartered Early Childhood Services in New Zealand (1996), and the supporting document Quality in Action (Ministry of Education, 1998), this focus on 'advanced knowledge' is addressed

explicitly as a requirement for 'current theory' to inform practice. While the meaning of 'current' may be contentious, this is a 'desirable objective' that no early childhood practitioner in New Zealand can afford to ignore. The development of an early childhood education code of ethics specifically for Aotearoa/New Zealand (NZEI, 1995) further reinforced the notion of professionalism and the underpinning need for practitioners to consider their own practice in the light of theories and bodies of knowledge put forward by others.

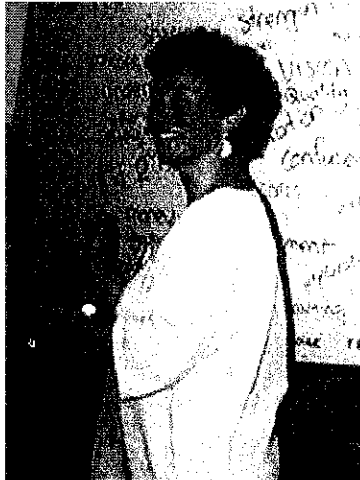
In 2003, early childhood practitioners are faced with 'advanced knowledge' that consists of a wide and often conflicting range of views. How do practitioners make professional decisions about their own practice in the light of such a range? What

constitutes 'current theory' as outlined in the DOPs? As Sally Lubeck (1998) points out

... any theory, once believed, begins to organise how we think and act in relation to children. If we believe in maturation, we wait; if we believe in constructivism, we provide opportunities for children to act on the world; and, if we believe that children are 'blank slates' we try to fill them with information through didactic instruction. (p. 55)

To complicate matters further, research has shown that there is often a substantial contradiction between what practitioners say they believe and how they act (Newman, 1998). In order to identify the contradictions and tensions in the professional work

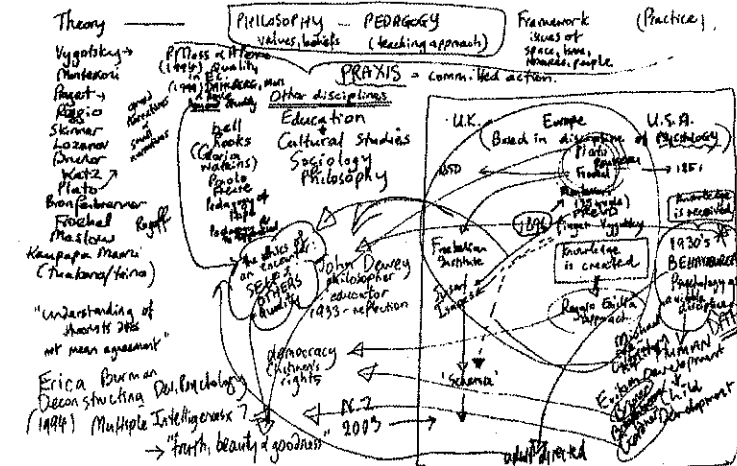
¹ The term practitioner is used in preference to educator or teacher due to the unresolved tensions around professionalism in NZ early childhood education in 2003.



The Teachers' refresher course session when practitioners located their own personal narratives.

of early childhood practitioners, an uncovering of espoused theories as well as beliefs and values is necessary. Also, the approach to practice derived from these theories and philosophies needs to be articulated with clarity. It is when the logistics of the approach are thought through, relative to actual practice, that the social political and moral factors influencing educators are evident: factors such as resistance to change, concern about control, fear of sharing thoughts and exposing behaviours and administrative unwillingness to allow practitioners to engage in real decision-making (Newman, 1998).

In an inevitable climate of tensions and constraints, then, practitioners must identify within themselves the power to make informed decisions that support rather than undermine the learning stories of the children they work with. An important aspect to this is the strengthening of professional knowledge that questions the institutional pressures that make it difficult to be responsive to children in the way that is perceived to be 'ideal' (Newman, 1998). In order to attain this strengthening of professional knowledge, early childhood practitioners working in early childhood settings in Aotearoa/New Zealand must reflect upon the particular historical, social, political



A diagram that emerged from the theory story session.

and cultural threads that have shaped suggested practice and consider the implications of these threads upon their own lived practice, which has often been dominated exclusively by the disciplinary perspectives of developmental psychology.

Early childhood practitioners must be supported in confronting and theorising their own practice through opportunities for discussion with others about particular issues of concern to them. Many practitioners are able to identify the problem areas but experience difficulty in creating the strategies by which they can make a difference to children's learning and then referencing these strategies to their own theoretical knowledge. This is due, in part, to the confusion created by practitioners participating in accepted 'commonsense' practice that is no longer overtly tied to the theory within which it was once grounded. A current example of this in Aotearoa/New Zealand is the prevalence of adult preoccupation with the environment, the programme and selected resources (covertly tied to Piagetian theory) at the expense of interaction with children. Any attempts to introduce, for example, the Vygotskian notion of 'scaffolding' are unlikely to be successful until theoretically derived strategies are philosophically grounded and consciously implemented, which may

mean considering more than one theoretical perspective. The less time spent on structuring or 'providing' an environment, the more time is spent being with and listening to children.

It is suggested that one impediment to the effective linking of theory to practice is the reliance by early childhood practitioners (and often by those who support their professional development) upon a proliferation of authoritative and popular publications and opinion pieces that mediate the theory to practice process for practitioners. Thus, theoretical perspectives are presented to practitioners in a decontextualised way, devoid of the historical, social, political, cultural and disciplinary threads that have shaped them. In this respect, the domination of developmental psychology and the accompanying proliferation of universalist, academic writing are addressed with concern by Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) and Moss and Petrie (2002). When theory is presented as the stories of people, stories that cross disciplinary boundaries and are historically sited in space and time, practitioners are able to make direct and moral links to their own narrative journey through the learning/teaching process.

The success of the Theory Story approach lies in sharing a range of

The Theory-Practice Continuum*

Contextual factors

Theory	Philosophy	Pedagogy	Framework	Practice
As a result of mulling over and grappling with...	I believe/value ...	And so I will...	By doing... (issues of time, space, resources and people)	While constantly reflecting in, on, and for action

* The idea for this continuum was prompted by the "Process of planning and programming" detailed in *Programming and planning for early childhood settings* (Arthur, et al, 1996).

theoretical perspectives told as the 'stories of others', linking these with derived practice and varied publications and then encouraging practitioners themselves to locate their own personal narratives and chosen theoretical perspectives within the loosely structured (and ultimately non-existent) framework detailed above (Hill, 1998). Praxis (committed action) is suggested as the sum of the parts.

Confusions that arise as a result of practitioners attempting to meet the expectations of policy and procedure within the framework of their existing theoretical knowledge are dissipated as policies, procedures and theories are 'demystified' and set within the historical context of early childhood education in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Lubeck (1998) advises caution about efforts to incorporate new ideas into old agendas, when this is unlikely to change the actual practices that deeply structure professional life. Fleer (2003) challenges the status of reified ideas in early childhood education. She warns "that the reification process results in slogans such as 'children learn through play' which simplify complex understanding and hide broader meanings" (p.77). Fendler (2003) notes that those who promote particular modes of reflection may be unwittingly and ironically engaging in disempowering rather than empowering practitioners. When theory is accessible, personalised and historically sited, practitioners are able to identify clichés and see the complexities that lie beyond their immediate practice in a highly

reflective manner and they become motivated to strengthen their professional knowledge upon a foundation of committed values and beliefs.

Every book, paper and research article written for practitioner reading must be transparent in its theoretical and disciplinary stance and should have the potential to let practitioners see their professional practice with clarity but perhaps in a different way, generating an engagement with the author's ideas rather than appearing as a set of helpful hints (Newman, 1998). When theory is presented as an engagement with ideas, early childhood practitioners are more able to constitute themselves as professionals, as intellectuals who participate in the cultural and political life of their communities rather than as mere facilitators of children's development (Lubeck, 1998). Novinger and O'Brien (2003, p.24) urge practitioners to raise critical questions about regulatory practices, to "trouble the standards discourse", and "to have an abiding faith in human possibility".

Practitioners who take the time and find the space to problematise their practice within the social, cultural, political and historical contexts of theoretical writing, to debate their practice with others and to align their practice with a committed and impassioned philosophy, are creating for themselves a rich, personal narrative that acknowledges the ongoing responsibility they have towards dynamic and thoughtful relationships with young children.

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