Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice through Research Partnership

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The research project with which this paper is concerned has three main aims:

1. To enable me, as an educational theorist, to test and refine my developing theory of learning profiles in the context of the practical problems of the school situation. My concern was not only to test for flaws in my theory as such but also to ensure that its formulation was readily accessible to classroom teachers.

2. To encourage the development of innovative solutions to concrete learning problems identified by classroom teachers.

3. To test a research partnership model of educational research.

The research project was initiated early this year at Mountain District Christian School, a small non-government Victorian school providing education for years P-10. It has approximately 160 students with 8 full time and 7 part time teachers. This school was chosen as the site for the research for several reasons:

1. I was familiar with the school, its history, aims and ethos, having acted as consultant to the school from time to time over a number of years, and having established a good rapport with the principal and several of the staff.

2. It is a school that has been open to adopting innovative approaches to education throughout its history.

3. The school principal and curriculum project coordinator were enthusiastic about the school’s participation in this project, ready to give it wholehearted support. They saw it as an opportunity to encourage further innovation that would improve the quality of education the school provides.

4. The small size of the school and the good rapport that I knew to exist among staff provided a favourable environment for the kind of research I had in mind.

In many respects the partnership model of research used in this project has likenesses to the collaborative research advocated by Carr and Kemmis [1986], and the participative research model described by Elden.
[1981]. Similarly it has likenesses to the Peel project reported by Baird and Mitchell [1987]. However, there are also significant differences related in large measure to a further reformulation of the theory/practice distinction.

Theory and Practice

There is a long and respected tradition in Western thought that gives privileged cognitive status to theory. It has long been assumed that theory provides us with the most penetrating or most accurate insights into the experiential world. Because of its privileged status, theoretical knowledge has been regarded as the guide to good practice.

Even though it is often not followed through very consistently, this assumption still has a strong hold in education. While theories that are articulated in ways that are not readily accessible to the classroom teacher are commonly dismissed as “impractical”, teachers quite commonly look for and welcome more accessible, user-friendly theories as models for their teaching practice.

I will be arguing that theorising provides valuable and distinctive insights into the experiential world, insights that are useful for the practice of teaching. At the same time, I will be arguing that theorising has no privileged status vis-a-vis other modes of experience.

The Claim of a Privileged Status for Theory

A brief overview of the history of the privileged status of theory in the Western tradition, while involving a philosophical excursus, is important background to the present discussion.

Among the ancient Greek philosophers, theory was regarded as having privileged status because it gave access to the fundamental structure of the world. Discussions of Greek views of theory often focus on Plato’s theory of recollection as presented in the Meno. Yet, in my view, Plato’s theory of recollection is peripheral to his epistemology. It is introduced in the Meno only as an argument for the immortality of the soul. The discussion in the Republic, together with parallel arguments in the Meno, is more significant for understanding Plato’s epistemology.

In brief, Plato distrusted sensory experience, regarding it as capable only of generating opinions (dovvexas) since sensory images are illusions (eijkatsiva). Knowledge (eipisthvmh) is gained through processes of reasoning (diavnoia) that give access to the transcendent reality of the world of ideas [Republic: 534b, 596-597d; Meno: 97-98c]. This theoretical knowledge of the transcendent ideas is normative for all human action. Sound practice is decisively guided by the
theoretical knowledge of transcendent ideas.

In many respects, however, Aristotle’s approach is more interesting and significant than Plato’s. Unlike Plato, who reduced all knowledge to the theoretical knowledge of transcendent ideas, Aristotle maintained a hierarchy of knowledge all of which is based on sense experience. All knowledge begins with sense experience [De Anima: 432a; Metaphysics: 980a].

Practical, or productive knowledge, is derived directly from sense experience. At the first, and most primitive level, a number of sensations are connected in the memory to form experience (eimpeiro-), a coherent view of the world that provides the basis for experienced action.

At the next level of practical knowledge, experiences are systematically connected to produce technological (tecnch) or productive knowledge (poohtikw'n) which is the basis for productive action.

However, we are still dealing with the world at a superficial level. To understand the basic structure of the world, the basic principles by which the world operates, we need theoretical knowledge (qewrhtikai) which forms the base for wise action. Technological knowledge leads to productive action but it may not be wise. Only as action is guided by theory can we ensure that it is wise action [Metaphysica: 980-982a].

Unlike experience and technology, theory is not produced by organising sensory impressions. It requires an intellectual process that abstracts from the sensory impressions the governing ideas that are the inner forms of all sensory reality [De Anima: 424a; Metaphysica: 103a, 1059b].

The importance of Aristotle’s theory is that he allows for practical knowledge which, for practical purposes is more useful than theory. Yet he gives privileged status to theoretical knowledge as the form of knowledge that alone can give us knowledge of the real structure constituting the experiential world.

Both Plato and Aristotle saw theory as an intellectual process giving access to the structure of the world; it enables us to reproduce in the mind the structural reality of the world external to the mind.

An important change took place in Greek thought when some of Plato's successors, the philosophers of middle platonism, argued that the ideal structure of the world is present as a conceptual structure innate in the human mind. With some overtones of stoicism, this theory held that the human mind is equipped with a priori ideas that correspond to the
ideas by which God structures the world [Merlan, 1967: 53-55].

In the 17th century Enlightenment this was taken a step further with the argument that human reason is equipped with a complete set of ideas that provide the basis for rational cognition of sensory experience. In distinction from middle platonism, the belief that these ideas correspond to divine ideas was abandoned so that even God himself was known as an Idea innate in human reason. Descartes [1960] in particular played a leading role in this reformulation of the nature of theory that preserved the privileged status of theory as the only way to give an authentic rational structure to the experiential world.

The dominant forms of Enlightenment rationalism reached a crisis point with Hume’s trenchant attacks [1978]. This crisis led to a shift in the way theory was understood. This shift is best illustrated by the proposal of Immanuel Kant who denied the possibility of knowledge of the fundamental structure of the world. This was a radical shift from the views of Plato and Aristotle, but also of Descartes. According to Kant all we can know with any certainty are phenomena which are no more than the sensory appearance of the world. Knowledge of the phenomena requires the organising of our sensory experiences in accordance with a rational conceptual structure innate in the human mind.

In short, no longer is the structure of knowledge seen as related to a given structure of the experienced world. Instead it is the production of a given conceptual structure of thought that imposes its order on the phenomenal world. Because this structure of thought was believed to be common to all rational persons, the theoretical knowledge developed from it was deemed to be universally valid knowledge providing the only reliable guide to practice. Theory retains its privileged status.

The advent of positivism in the 19th century, spearheaded by Auguste Comte [1975], brought a further shift in the understanding of the nature of theory. Not only was it no longer seen as providing a conceptual map of the experienced world; it was no longer seen as following a conceptual map innate to the human mind.

Theorising was now seen as the following of systematic procedures of reasoning in order to articulate universal laws that have both explanatory and predictive status in relation to the experienced world.

All quest for a structure of the experiential world is abandoned. Theory now provides no more than universally valid laws to explain the world we experience. Yet the privileged status of theory remains. Because theory provides the definitive explanation of the experiential world, only theory can ensure effective practice.

The belief in the privileged status of theory has thus persisted in the Western tradition for over two thousand years. It still remains
influential today. For example, the recent text on educational research by Hittleman and Simon [1992] clearly gives a privileged place to models of educational research based on positivist theory. Other forms of research are acknowledged but with a lower status.

The Challenge to Theoretical Objectivity

Basic to the privileged status of theory has been the belief that theorising uses some form of rational filter that filters out all subjectivity in the processing of knowledge. It has been thought possible for theorising to exclude the personal beliefs of the knowing subject in order to achieve strictly objective knowledge — i.e. knowledge of the knowable world as it really is.

Since the 1950s there have been strong challenges to this belief. A rising tide of thought has argued that all our observations are shaped by our beliefs about the nature of the world and that all processing of observations occurs within a personal, or social belief framework. This movement was led by philosophers of science among whom were Thomas Kuhn [1962], Paul Feyerabend [1975] and Michael Polanyi [1962].

In line with this development, Piaget and Garcia [1983: 280-285] mount a strong argument that the rise of modern science was not the result of the adoption of more rigorous observations or a more objective scientific method. They argue that it was brought about by a major shift in beliefs about the nature of the world. This shift in belief did not follow from new observations or new methods of investigation but preceded them. On this account it was a change in world view belief — “une conception du monde” or “Weltanschauung” — that produced the shift from Aristotelian to modern physics.

This important shift that gave a key role to the beliefs of the subject in theorising rapidly spread to the social sciences, as indicated, for example, by Reason and Rowan [1981]. In the field of educational research it has led to an explosion of interest in qualitative research indicated, for example, by Burgess [1985] and to the development of the idea of the teacher as researcher, led initially by Stenhouse [1975].

This development has brought about a significant, yet often unnoticed, understanding of the nature of theory. Previously a theory was seen as a systematic account of some area of experience that would hold good in spite of differences in personal beliefs. A theory was a set of explanatory beliefs that were deemed to be justified for all rational persons. Now, a theory becomes no more than a set of explanatory beliefs shared by a certain social group.

On the surface, this movement breaks down the hegemony of theory over practice by depriving theory of its privileged status. However, this impression is deceptive. Certainly practitioners become more actively
involved in the research process and matching theory with practice is seen more in terms of a coherence between the beliefs and practices of a group of practitioners.

In educational terms this opens the way for teachers to develop and test their own theories as the beliefs that govern their teaching practice. However, if we look more closely we find that theories continue to prescribe the processes by which teachers proceed in achieving this match between theory and practice. In this way, theory retains its privileged, hegemonic status.

The action research theory of Carr and Kemmis [1986] is a useful example of this. In using this example I want to stress that I find a great deal of value in the work of Carr and Kemmis and have frequently made use of their action research cycle in practice. However, I think it is clear that they continue the long tradition that has given theory hegemony over practice.

At the level of developing theories (critically tested beliefs) for the daily practice of teaching, their model involves teachers actively in the development of theories. At this level, theory is owned by the teachers concerned.

However, the process by which teachers develop their theories is determined by a meta-theory, a theory prescribing the role of theories and the processes by which they are to be developed. This meta-theory is drawn in large measure from the theoretical work of Jürgen Habermas. On the Carr and Kemmis model, teachers can develop authentic theories of teaching only by working within the structures determined by this dialectic meta-theory. Teachers can develop appropriate theories only by “an integration of theory and practice as reflective and practical moments in a dialectical process of reflection, enlightenment and political struggle carried out by groups for the purpose of their own emancipation.” [Carr and Kemmis, 1986: 144].

The use of the term “facilitator” [Carr and Kemmis, 1986: 200-203] subtly indicates this continued dominion of theory over practice. Carr and Kemmis are insistent that the facilitator should neither formulate the research problems nor guide the teacher-researcher to “correct” solutions. However, the facilitator has a crucial role in assisting and guiding teachers in following the procedures of the model of theory development as prescribed by the appropriate meta-theory. Since this model is a theoretical construct it is clear that the facilitator is there to ensure that the teachers' practice conforms to the “correct” theory.

In short, teachers are encouraged to be actively involved in research but within a theoretical framework prescribed by theorists. While I think that it is an advance to involve teachers actively in research I
question whether it is satisfactory to constrain them within a theoretical framework. I think we need to go further in reformulating the relation between theory and practice.

Reconceptualising Theory and Practice

We may discern two contrary tendencies in the history of the conceptualisation of theory and practice in the Western tradition. The oldest and most persistent makes a sharp distinction between theory and practice, giving a privileged place to theory. The second, and more recent, has a tendency to blur the distinction, with theories being seen as nothing more than practitioners' beliefs about their practice. Yet, in this second tendency, theory usually retains its privileged place through a meta-theory that prescribes the appropriate nature of the relation between the theories and the practices.

My proposal is that we abandon all talk that suggests that theory is something distinct from practice. Instead, I suggest that we recognise different, and complementary modes of practice, or different modes of interacting with our world. We may then speak of teaching practice as one mode of interacting with the educational situation and educational theorising practice as another mode of interacting with the same situation. These two modes of interaction will produce complementary kinds of insights into the situation with neither having a privileged status in relation to the other.

While it will certainly still be true that theorising practice will result in theories, the status of these theories will be changed in two important ways. Firstly, they have no privileged status; they are neither more penetrating nor more reliable than any other insights. Secondly, they will be open and fluid, readily open to change. The emphasis will not be on theories as finished products but on theorising as an ongoing process.

At the same time, there is no attempt to conflate theory and practice. On the contrary the practices of teaching and theorising need to be clearly distinguished.

Teaching practice is the empowering of students to learn. Borrowing from John Van Dyk [1990] we might break this down to guiding, unfolding, enabling. The major point is that the focus of teaching practice is always on learning in a particular, concrete situation.

Theorising practice is the development of systematic explanations based on law-like regularities that hold good for all teaching/learning situations within definable limits. It focuses on abstracted features of multiple teaching/learning situations.
To say that theorising involves abstraction does not imply that it is detached from the concrete world of teaching and learning. Theorising does not require a detached, disinterested stance. Indeed it will not be effective if it does adopt such a stance. Theorising can only occur by a close involvement with concrete situations.

Theorising has an abstract character, not because of a detached stance but because it organises the experience of the concrete and particular in terms of conceptual classes, and relations between these classes, rather than particular instances of these conceptual classes.

For example, theorising is concerned with inventiveness in learning; a teacher, on the other hand, will be concerned with particular instances of inventive activity exhibited by a particular learner. Or, whereas a teacher will be concerned with a particular act of imagination shown by a student, the theorist will be concerned with the role of imagination as a category affecting learning in general.

The abstract character of theorising gives it a special ability to provide educational insights that can be applied to a wide variety of situations. Its limitation, is that it cannot incorporate all the many unique factors that affect learning. It can, and should, recognise that these factors are present and important but cannot incorporate them in its theories.

On the other hand, the particularity of teaching practice enables the teacher to gain insight into the unique features of a particular learning situation. On the other hand, it cannot provide the kind of insights that come from the wider perspective of theorising. The insights of teaching practice and theorising practice, therefore, complement one another.

I have said that theorising holds good within definable limits. I reject the notion that it can be claimed of any theory that it holds good for every possible situation. As a theorist I can claim only that my theory holds good for those kinds of situations in which it has been adequately tested. It was Isaac Newton's mistake to suppose that his theory of gravity was universally valid, holding good throughout the whole possible universe of human experience. It still holds good within more narrowly defined limits [Davies, 1985: 74] but developments in twentieth century physics have decisively exploded the idea of its absolute universal validity.

Yet it remains an all too common tendency of theorists to give the impression that there is good reason to take their theories as being valid for every possible situation throughout the whole universe of human experience.
A Partnership Model of Research

A partnership model of research in education is one that brings together teaching practitioners and theorising practitioners as a team with complementary insights to contribute to the formulation and resolution of educational problems. In principle, it might include other kinds of partners, such as parents or students. In the case of the research project on which I am reporting the partnership team was limited to teachers and educational theorist.

While someone will need to be responsible for coordinating the research project, there is no director, nor is there a single facilitator. Each member of the team is a facilitator, facilitating the process and one another according to the insights each has.

Partnership research requires a consensual process of decision making that can only be achieved where there is trust and openness among the members of the team. Elden [1981: 263] notes that this trust is important for any form of participative research. Such a consensual process requires, also, a sufficient basis of shared beliefs about education on which to develop consensus. The members of the team need not agree about everything, but there must be a certain minimum of shared beliefs to make consensus possible. What this minimum is will vary from situation to situation.

It is also important to partnership research that not only the research problem but also the process be a matter of consensual decision. I do not pretend that, as a theorist, I have no meta-theory of any sort. However, my meta-theory does not prescribe a research process. On the contrary, it holds that a research process should be designed to meet the particular requirements of a particular problem situation. In the case of partnership research, this means that it should be designed by the research partnership term by a consensual decision making process. In short, the team, as a partnership of equals with diverse insights, should control the research process from beginning to end.

The Learning Profile

From my point of view I was interested in this exercise in partnership research for further developing my learning profile theory. As part of this, I wanted to ensure that the terminology I was using would be readily understood by classroom teachers. This was important because, in the end, the success of the learning profile approach depends on judgments made by teachers.

For several years, I had been in interested in the development of learning styles theories, such as those of McCarthy [1987], Gregorc [1982, 1985] and Rita and Kenneth Dunn [1989, 1990]. It seemed to me that these theories embodied important insights into the learning
process with significant implications for both teaching and curriculum development.

However, I was dissatisfied with the work I had seen on two grounds:

1. It has a strong tendency, in practice, to label a student with a learning style label that at best is only an approximation of that student’s actual patterns of learning. Learning style theorists such as McCarthy do recognise this problem but the organisation of learning characteristics in terms of a finite number of discrete styles still encourages this misleading and, in my view, dangerous labelling.

2. It continues the hegemony of theory over practice by the use of a theoretical model for the identification of learning styles. The teacher’s own understanding of the learning patterns of students is subjugated to the information provided by theoretical instruments. In this connection Rita Dunn [1980: 16] is quite explicit in rejecting the teacher’s ability to identify the learning characteristics of students. She insists that only a theoretical instrument can accurately identify learning styles.

To overcome both these objections, yet make effective use of the insights offered by the various learning styles theories, I set about developing a learning profiles approach to the problem. This approach has been under development for a number of years now. There are two basic features of the learning profile, as I use the term:

1. It makes no attempt to group learners in learning styles or to identify types of learners. Instead it identifies a range of learning characteristics that affect the way in which people learn. Inventiveness, for example, is a strong characteristic of some learners but much weaker in others. Some learn best in a highly structured environment while others learn best in open-ended situations where they have considerable freedom to set their own course. Some learn best when knowledge is verbally encoded while others learn best when knowledge is encoded in schemes of action. Some, according to Dunn’s research [1989: 54,55], learn best early in the day while most learn better later in the day.

This is only a sample of the possible list of learning characteristics that provide the basis for the learning profile. Again it needs to be stressed that there is no attempt to use this list to develop types of learners. A learning profile is always a profile of an individual learner, it is a mapping of significant characteristics of the individual learner that affect the way that person learns.

2. It provides no theoretical instrument for identifying learning profiles. Instead, it relies on the teacher’s knowledge of the student, gained in the daily interaction of the teaching/learning situation, to identify the learning profile of a student. Contrary to Dunn, it presumes that, given adequate information, the judgment of the
A competent teacher is trustworthy. The learning profile theory is designed only to provide the teacher with a range of possible learning profile characteristics giving the teacher the broadest possible range of possibilities in developing the profile. The learning characteristics themselves are open to review and modification either through further theoretical research or through the critical judgments of teachers as they use these characteristics as a guide to understanding learning patterns in the day to day learning situation.

A criticism of this approach that has been made by some is that it is impractical to develop a detailed learning profile of every student. My response is that it is not necessary to do so. It is only necessary to develop learning profiles of a limited number of students in a school to effect significant, beneficial change in teaching practice. These students may be either students with severe learning disabilities or students who are performing exceptionally well. In the first case, the learning profile will be used to identify learning strengths that the student has but are not being effectively utilised in the school’s learning program. By changing teaching/learning strategies to take advantage of the strengths significant improvement can be achieved in this individual’s learning.

In the second case, the development of a learning profile may identify weaknesses in the learning patterns of the “successful” learner that have not been noticed because assessment procedures do not take account of these areas of learning. Again, teaching/learning strategies, and the associated assessment procedures, can be changed to ensure that the student’s areas of weakness are strengthened.

An effective implementation of the learning profile approach will not stop at this point. It will recognise that the changes that have benefited these particular students are likely also to bring benefits to others. Consequently there will be an extension of the range of teaching/learning strategies, and also of assessment procedures, provided for all students to ensure a learning environment that provides optimum opportunities for learning by all students.

The Research Partnership Project

Because I initiated the research partnership project at Mountain Distinct Christian School with the purpose of testing and refining my learning profile theory, it may seem that I violated the partnership principle by setting the agenda in advance. However, this school was chosen for the research only after it was clear that the school’s principal and teaching staff shared my interest in pursuing the issue of learning profiles. Had they not shared this interest, I would have looked for another school with which I could work in an authentic
partnership relation.

After the initial exploration had made clear the possibility of an authentic partnership model of research, the research developed along the following lines, broadly following an action research approach. At each step of the process every effort was made to ensure a consensus of all concerned on the procedure to be followed.

≥● Step 1

The school’s teaching staff had already developed an interest in learning styles through the contact some had had with McCarthy’s work [1987] and all had become familiar with Van Brummelen’s [1988] modification of McCarthy’s theory. However, since the research project involved the trialling of my learning profiles approach, the process was initiated with a briefing seminar on this approach, involving all teaching staff.

During this seminar the decision was taken to proceed by selecting individual students as research subjects on learning profiles. It was left to individual teachers, in collaboration with colleagues, to select these students and prepare a provisional learning profile based on their experience of the student.

It was also agreed that the research would proceed through several partnership teams each involving at least one teacher with day to day contact with the student concerned, the consultant theorist, and the school’s Curriculum Project Coordinator.

≥● Step 2

When the teachers concerned had prepared the provisional profiles of the selected students, the partnership teams met for extended analysis and review of the problems indicated by these profiles. The focus of these conferences was to identify learning strengths of the students that were not being used adequately in the existing school learning processes.

While the contributions of the various members of the team were not confined in any strict way to particular kinds of input peculiar to each, it is possible to distinguish kinds of input that constituted the major contributions of each. These were:

The teacher’s distinctive contribution
•Identifying problem
•Making final decision on action
•Implementing action
The theorist’s distinctive contribution
• Suggesting diagnostic possibilities specific to the particular situation
• Offering a range of possible lines of action, as practical courses of actions appropriate to the particular situation

The project coordinator’s distinctive contribution
• Extended knowledge of the situation
• Placing the problem in the whole school perspective
• Coordinating insights

≥• Step 3

The next step in the research process was action by the teacher that implemented some type of change in the teaching/learning situation with special reference to the student selected as the subject of the research.

While the team offered possible courses of action for the teacher to take, the final decision on this was entirely a matter for the teacher concerned. It was expected that the teacher would carefully monitor the effect of this change in practice.

≥• Step 4

After an appropriate period of implementing the change in teaching practice, the teacher reported back to the partnership team which then further analysed and reviewed the situation, affirmed the action taken where it was clear that there had been positive results and suggested further courses of action where problems remained or new problems had emerged.

≥• Step 5

The process then moved back to a new phase of implementing classroom change.

≥• Step 6

Because of a strong desire by the school principal that this project be owned by all teaching staff, and because of an interest in all staff in following the progress of the project, a second session was held at this point for all teaching staff in order to share with them the insights gained from the research process to date and to further develop their understanding of learning profiles.

A Provisional Assessment of the Research Project
Because the research project is not yet complete — it is intended to continue through next year — any assessment at this stage must be provisional. However, at this stage several benefits are evident from the research partnership model:

- The combining in a partnership situation of participants approaching the problem on the basis of different modes of experience has enabled a clarification of the problem and offered possibilities for solutions that would be unlikely to occur if the analysis of the situation had been dominated by one mode of experience — whether theorising or teaching practice.

- The affirmation of teachers’ insights and judgments as having equal value with those of educational theorists has resulted in teachers not only being actively involved in research activity, but in sharing the control of the process. Control has shifted from the professional researcher to a shared control.

- Teachers have developed a more flexible approach to teaching practice with a readiness to try new practices that break with the existing patterns of practice. This is particularly significant in view of the fact that the school concerned is already one that has developed innovative approaches as one of its characteristics. Two examples will be enough to illustrate this readiness to change:

(i) David is a student with severe learning disabilities largely due to foetal alcohol syndrome. At the start of the research process the teacher concerned, who was extremely competent, had despaired of finding any way to overcome his disabilities. However, in the course of the first partnership team review of the case it emerged that he had taught himself, without assistance, to operate a Macintosh computer with a high level of competence. This suggested that he has a significant level of competence in spatial modes of learning though his verbal and mathematical learning skills are very weak. The decision was made, therefore, to provide him with learning programs that rely on the use of spatial skills.

In implementing this decision the teacher shifted the emphasis of his mathematics learning from arithmetic to geometry, which relies largely on spatial learning. This involved a departure from the specified curriculum which did not allow for a strong geometry emphasis at this stage of learning. It was a move, therefore, that required the teacher to make a somewhat daring innovation.

The results were dramatic not only in significant improvement in the learning of mathematics but also in giving David confidence to participate in other areas of learning. This included giving a talk to the whole class in which he openly shared his foetal alcohol syndrome problem with his fellow students.

(ii) One of Paul’s problems in the initial investigation was an excessive restlessness in class situations, a restlessness that disturbed the whole class. Again the teacher had tried all he knew
without effect.
In the partnership team’s review of this situation, the point was made that some students learn better if they have some freedom to move while learning. Being expected to sit still, even when listening to a teacher, inhibits rather than helps some learners. At this point the teacher suggested moving him from the front to the back of the class. The other members of the team agreed that this was a good idea. Doing this was a significant change for the teacher since it violated the accepted wisdom that disruptive students are best kept at the front where they can be under the teacher’s watchful eye. However, the effect of the change has been positive in bringing Paul’s patterns of movement under control so that they are significantly less disruptive. This has been achieved through the pressure of his peers that has proven more effective than the teacher’s attempts at control.

≥• A major spin-off from the research process has been the initiation of a review of the school’s curriculum to ensure that the teaching/learning strategies, and especially the assessment procedures, take adequate account of the different ways in which students learn. This has been initiated because early in the research process it became clear that, in spite of the school’s commitment to a wide range of learning, assessment procedures in particular rely almost wholly on written skills, including written mathematical skills. One consequence that was noted was that one student, who was a research subject, is brilliant in technical learning by doing but performs very poorly in the assessment of his learning by the school because this requires written skills which he lacks. Ways are therefore being explored to include effective assessment of this and other kinds of learning that are not adequately identified by the present written types of assessment.

≥• Finally, the teachers involved have indicated without exception that they have benefited as teachers from this research partnership process and are keen to continue to be involved in the process, as the following comments by teachers indicate:

≥• Valued encouraging, non-threatening input on different approaches to teaching
≥• Made me more accountable and gave me ideas for change in a non-threatening way
≥• Helped me see child from a different perspective, giving me new ideas to try
≥• Sharpened teaching insights by opening new possibilities
≥• Helped me to explore ways of encouraging student’s strengths
≥• Helped me understand student interests and thinking

Teachers have also made some helpful suggestions for making the process even more effective. One of these suggestions is that I, as the
educational theorist in the team, should be more involved as an observer in the classroom situation. This is something that I also think would be desirable but, for practical reasons, was not possible this year. However, the fact that teachers have asked for this kind of involvement on their own initiative indicates that a research partnership model can generate a level of trust between teacher and theorist to the point that the teacher welcomes the theorist’s presence in the classroom without feeling threatened.

Observations on the project by the school principal and the curriculum project coordinator are included as appendix A and B respectively.

From my point of view, the exercise has been invaluable in developing and refining my learning profiles theory and I am grateful to the principal and staff of Mountain District Christian School for their readiness to participate in this project.

While I would not wish to say that all educational research should follow the research partnership model, my experience convinces me that it is an invaluable model that offers benefits not available through other approaches to research.

Bibliography

Appendix A

Observations by the School Principal

As both a participant teacher in the learning profiles project and the school's principal, I have been very pleased with the outcomes and general directions that the project has facilitated.

The “partnership” model of a theorist (in this case Dr Stuart Fowler) and practitioner (our classroom teachers) working together in such a project has for me, as an educational leader in the school been exciting and challenging, producing valuable insights for the overall
educational program of our school.

Teacher’s intuitive sense knowledge has been enhanced and enriched in dialogue with the theorist, and the theorist’s work has been sharpened with a grounding in the practical concerns of the learning context of the classroom. The classroom teachers have appreciated the recognition and affirmation of their giftedness, their educational insight, their “gut feelings” which this partnership has provided. I also believe they have been more willing to dialogue, challenge and even disagree with the theorist as together we have forged a way forward in our understanding of learning styles.

The partnership research teams consisted of:

- classroom teacher
- theorist
- the school’s Curriculum Project Coordinator

The participation in the team of the Curriculum Project Coordinator has been an important factor in adding depth to the process.

The work of these small teams, together with the general focussing seminars with the whole staff have heightened teaching staff awareness of both individual students as well as their own self-understanding. With most of our school’s full time teaching staff either presently involved in, or having recently completed additional post graduate studies in education, this particular partnership project has been most encouraging.

Teachers continue to value the development of their teaching insights, especially where there is active involvement with their classroom. Given time to reflect and discuss particular students and the best ways to cater for them, I believe our teachers have benefited professionally and consequently the school’s program has received significant “tuning”.

We are very grateful for Dr Fowler’s willingness to work with us in this partnership and it is our desire to continue this process of partnership into next year.

David Paech
Appendix B

Observations by the Curriculum Project Coordinator

As a participant of the learning profiles research project I have been very interested to observe it from the angle of how a partnership works between a classroom teacher and an academic/theorist. Several teachers
have commented on the importance of having a teacher from within the staff involved as a mediator/coordinator. As this person I know it has been important because I can find practical examples from that teachers’ work that the theorist is talking about to further explain the ideas, to ground them, expand them.

Secondly, by involving a staff member from the beginning in taking a leadership role in planning the research, the whole project will more likely be shaped to fit within the school’s current priorities and of the teachers. This is very important in reducing the real threat of burdening teachers with perceived extra work.

Thirdly, it gives the theorist a contact person who can follow up strategies and keep the project moving.

In essence, it is important to have this structure of three people. More than the structure, each of the three people need key knowledge and skills to maintain the partnership. Some I have identified are:

Theorist  • Knowledge of history/politics/ethics of the school.
           • Clear connections with the values, priorities of the research with the teachers’ school.

Coordinator• Sensitivity to strengths and weaknesses of the teacher and of students they teach.
           • Flexible, creative ideas to overcome blocks.

Teacher• Appreciation for the importance of theory.
          • Honesty in saying what they understand, can or can’t do.

Andrew Schmidt