The Theory Question In Research Capacity Building In Education: Towards An Agenda For Research And Practice

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ABSTRACT: The question of capacity building in education has predominantly been approached with regard to the methods and methodologies of educational research. Far less attention has been given to capacity building in relation to theory. In many ways the latter is as pressing an issue as the former, given that good research depends on a combination of high quality techniques and high quality theorising. The ability to capitalise on capacity building in relation to methods and methodologies may therefore well be restricted by a lack of attention to theory. In this paper we make a case for capacity building with regard to theory, explore the different roles of theory in educational research, and provide an outline of an agenda for capacity building with regard to theory.

Keywords: educational research, capacity building, theory, educational theory, disciplines, purposes of research, purposes of theory

1. Introduction

Over the past decade there have been major initiatives within UK educational and social science research to address perceived capacity problems in the field (see Mills e*t al*., 2006). Key initiatives include the TLRP[1] Research Capacity Building Network, the Scottish Applied Educational Research Scheme and, more recently, the Welsh Education Research Network (see Davies and Salisbury, 2009; Fowler and Proctor, 2008; Rees *et al*., 2007). What characterises these and other initiatives – including ESRC's Research Methods Programme, its National Centre for Research Methods and its Researcher Development Initiative[2] – is that they focus almost exclusively on capacity building with regard to the methods and methodologies of research. Far less attention, if any, has been given to capacity building in relation to theory. In many ways the latter is as pressing an issue as the former given that good research depends on a combination of high quality techniques and high quality theorising. The ability to capitalise on capacity building in relation to methods and methodologies may well be restricted, therefore, by a lack of attention to theory. In light of persistent concerns about the quality and relevance of educational research, nationally and internationally, and against the background of the results of the 2008 UK Research Assessment Exercise[3] in which the panel reviewing educational research explicitly mentioned its concerns about the quality of theorising in educational research, we therefore wish to make a case for a much more explicit engagement with the theory question in research capacity building in education. But what would that mean and how might this be done?

In this paper we address this question primarily by means of an exploration of the different roles theory can play in educational research. It is, after all, only when we know *what* theory is doing or might do that we can begin to outline *how* we might

build capacity with regard to theory. We begin with a brief overview of the discussion on theory in education and provide an initial definition of 'theory'. We then discuss the roles of theory in three different forms of research: research that aims to explain, research that aims to understand, and research that aims to contribute to emancipation. Next we focus on the ways in which theory can be said to 'add plausibility' to empirical findings. While the idea that theory can be used to 'add plausibility' suggests an approach to research where the overall ambition is to make what is strange familiar, we show that research can also operate in the opposite mode where the aim is to make what is familiar strange. We then briefly discuss what we refer to as 'autonomous theorising', which is about forms of theory development that take place relatively independent from empirical research or educational practice. In the concluding section of the paper we discuss what this suggests for capacity building with regard to theory. We do this in the form of an agenda which both outlines areas for further development – that is, where we need to know more about the ways in which theory is deployed in educational research, practice and policy – and indicates ways in which capacity building with regard to theory might be advanced.

2. The Theory Question In Education

Questions about theory have been raised ever since education became an academic field of study (see, for example, Labaree, 2006; Lagemann, 2000; Thiersch *et al.*, 1978). In Germany this happened in 1779 when Ernst Christian Trapp became the first Professor of Education at the University of Halle (Ruprecht, 1978). Other countries followed (much) later. England, for example had its first Professor of Education in 1873, and Scotland in 1876 (see Monroe, 1911, pp. 401–409). Discussions about theory have often been conducted in terms of unhelpful dichotomies such as theory *versus* practice, the theoretical *versus* the empirical, or theoretical *versus* useful. Such rhetorical moves have tended to give theory a bad name. There are, however, compelling arguments for the need for theory (and we will return to this in more detail below). One goes back to David Hume's insight that the only thing that can be empirically established is correlation between observable phenomena, and that theory is needed to generate explanations of underlying causative processes (Hume, 1999). In interpretative research a key role for theory lies in deepening and broadening understandings of 'everyday' interpretations and experiences (see, for example, Giddens 1976), while the primary interest of critical theory lies in exposing how hidden power structures influence and distort such interpretations and experiences (see Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Habermas, 1973).

Within recent discussions about educational research there appears to be a tendency to move away from theory. We can see this, for example, in the idea that educational research should focus on generating knowledge about 'what works' – an idea which tends to prioritise the empirical ('evidence') over the theoretical (see, for example, Thomas and Pring, 2004; Biesta, 2007; 2010c). It is also manifest in more explicit discussions about the value of theory for educational research and practice. Both Carr (2006) and Thomas (2007) seem to be of the opinion that current research and practice are over-theorised and would benefit from less rather than

more theory (Thomas) or, in the case of Carr, of no theory at all. These discussions not only raise questions about the particular role of theory within the 'paradigm' of evidence-based education, but also indicate a need for a more precise analysis of the extent to which and the ways in which educational research and practice are actually over or under-theorised and why and how this might matter.[4]

Any discussion of theory stands for the difficult task of defining what the word 'theory' actually means. This, as we will show below, is not something that can be entirely resolved in the abstract. What a theory 'is' and what it 'does' depends to a large extent on the particular 'work' it is supposed to do, and within different historical and social contexts but also within different research traditions we can see that theory is expected to do different things.[5] If we go back to the Greek origins of the word – which of course always raises the question where the Greeks got their words from – theory (θεωρι′α) has to do with spectatorship: being a spectator of a performance or a festival, including religious festivals, being an official envoy to a festival, consulting an oracle, or making a journey in order to study something. Interestingly the word 'theory' here is very much about the empirical: about direct experience and witnessing. With Plato and Aristotle, presumably partly as a result of the influence of Pythagoras, theory becomes concerned with the non-empirical, that is, with knowledge of Platonic ideas and Aristotelian forms. Theory becomes identified with knowledge of what is permanent and unchangeable in contrast to knowledge about the empirical world of change, flux and appearances.

The distinction between the empirical and the theoretical gains further prominence with the rise of the scientific worldview of modern science where theory gets the role of providing *explanations* of the causal connections between observables. Here theory transforms into what Gaston Bachelard (1986, p. 38) has referred to as 'a science of the hidden' – and we can find a similar role for theory in interpretative and critical forms of research. This suggests at least one important 'quality' of theory, which is the fact that theory is generally deployed in order to make things visible or intelligible that are not immediately observable. In the natural sciences theory often performs this function by making plausible why certain laws – such as Ohm's law or Boyle's law – are as they are (which is done through accounts of the behaviour of electrons and electric charge or the behaviour of atoms in gasses respectively). In the social sciences theory performs this function by trying to make plausible why people act as they act or do as they do (for example through accounts of people's perceptions and motivations or more fundamental 'drives' or through accounts of the complexities of social interaction and communication). This not only means that theory should be distinguished from laws or empirical generalisations. It also suggests that theory quite often has a certain narrative 'form' (on this see also Norris, 1985). Whether this means that theory has to be understood as entirely speculative or as potentially supported or validated by empirical facts has been one of the ongoing discussions within twentieth-century philosophy of science, particularly in relation to questions about the relationship between facts and theory (see, for example, Dewey, 1938; Popper, 1968; Quine, 1963).

If this suffices as a very brief indication of what theory is 'about', we now turn to a more detailed discussion of the different roles theory can play in the conduct of educational research.

3. Purposes Of Research And The Roles Of Theory
Educational research shows a predominance of what we would term descriptive, analytical and reflective contributions to policy and practice. Some of the research simply tries to document what is going on, often using taken for granted categories as foundational, for example, teacher, learner, school, subject. In other cases, research moves more towards analysis, trying to identify trends, patterns and, in some cases, relationships between variables, aspects or dimensions. Such research focuses, for example, on the experiences of students, on teaching and tutoring practices, on assessment, on management, on policy and on wider trends and developments. Some of the descriptive and analytical work aligns itself uncritically with policy speak or fashionable concepts from research and theory. This is often done in the spirit of contributing to or impacting upon policy implementation or the improvement of practice, yet without asking any critical questions about content, focus, concepts or direction. Others draw sometimes substantively, sometimes gesturally and sometimes metaphorically on recognisable theories, such as activity theory, actor-network-theory, Lave and Wenger's work on legitimate peripheral participation and communities of practice, complexity theory, problem-based learning theory, Kolb's and Dewey's work on experiential and experimental learning. Reference to, and use of ideas from theorists, such as Vygotsky, Bourdieu or Foucault waxes and wanes. We might conclude, therefore, that the field is actually doing well, that research and scholarship are flourishing, without there being an explicit strong presence of theory. So why would we need theory? Why would we want (more and better) theory? And why should we be concerned about an alleged absence of theory and the need to build capacity in this arena?

A first answer to these questions can be given in relation to what we take to be the 'received' view about the roles of theory in empirical research more generally. We refer to this as the received view because of the fact that many introductions into the theory and philosophy of empirical research in education and (other) social science disciplines tend to distinguish between three different approaches – often referred to with the rather unhelpful term of 'paradigms' (see Biesta, 2010a). Whereas these approaches are often characterised in terms of the kind of data they make use of – which has led to the equally unhelpful notions of quantitative and qualitative research – we find it more useful to make a distinction between three different *purposes* of social research: causal explanation; interpretation; and emancipation. In each case there are important reasons for the need for theory and theorising, and in each case theory performs a different function.

As we have already alluded to, with regard to explanation the argument for theory goes back to David Hume's insight that the only thing that can empirically be established is correlations between observable phenomena. Theory is therefore

needed to generate explanations of underlying causative processes and mechanisms. In interpretative research, the role for theory lies in deepening and broadening understanding of everyday interpretations and experiences. The task for theory here is not to describe *what* people are saying and doing, but to make intelligible *why* people are saying and doing what they are saying and doing. The primary interest of critical theory lies in exposing how hidden power structures influence and distort such experiences and interpretations. The ambition here is that the exposure of the workings of power can contribute to emancipation (see Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Habermas, 1973).

When we look at the uses of theory in this way, we can already begin to make some sense of the state of theory in educational research. The predominance of descriptive and analytical research fits relatively neatly in the category of interpretative research. In a sense this is not surprising given that many would agree that education is a social – and therefore socially constructed and (re)produced – reality. Viewed in this way, education exists in and through people's interpretations, meanings and actions, which means that in order to study education as a social phenomenon it has to gain access to these interpretations and meanings. This is, of course neither a new insight nor something that is specific for educational practices, as it is simply stating that social reality *qua social reality* is different from physical reality.

To a certain extent this also explains the much smaller number of explanatory studies in educational research. The argument here is that 'strong' causal explanations are only possible if we can assume the existence of a reality in which there are 'strong' deterministic connections. While this might be a valid assumption for what is commonly referred to as physical reality – although recent advances in complexity theory have raised important questions about this (see Osberg and Biesta, 2010) – it is less likely to be a valid assumption in the social domain, mainly because any connections between 'causes' and 'effects' are achieved through interpretation which, in itself, is an open, non-deterministic process. This is not to say that it is not possible to find correlations between variables, but only that the modes of explanation of such correlations – and thus the underlying theorising – is unlikely to take the form of strong, deterministic causal connections.

This helps us to give a first answer to the question as to what kind of theory we might need for educational research. We could say that to the extent to which we are interested in 'causal' questions – that is in identifying and understanding correlations – we need theory that helps us to make plausible why things are correlated in the way they are. This is, of course, only a formal answer to this question and the real issue is what kinds of theory might perform this role satisfactorily. An important implication for theory and theorising is that any attempt to theorise correlations – either at 'micro' or 'macro' level – eventually has to focus on the actions and interpretations of individuals and groups, as it is only at that level and through such processes that connections are made/achieved. This means that interpretative forms of research are indispensable in *any* form of educational

research (and social science research more generally), not only in so-called interpretative research. On the basis of this reasoning comes a particular task for theorising, viz., to generate answers to the question as to *why* people are saying what they are saying, doing what they are doing, and acting in the way they are. It is here that theory again plays an important role, not to uncover causal connections but to 'add plausibility' to empirical findings.

A strong version of 'adding plausibility' is Max Weber's idea of explanatory understanding – *erklärendes Verstehen* (see Weber, 1980[1922]). The idea here is that the task of theory is to make the case, given the particular interpretations people have of the situation they are in, that it was rational for them to act in the way they acted. One of the key questions is whether we can assume that people will always act rationally. Weber's answer to this question is mainly methodological, as he would argue that it is only to the extent to which we (can) assume that people act rationally that explanatory understanding is possible. We would argue that weaker forms of theorising in interpretative research still aim to 'add plausibility' to the accounts of social actors, first and foremost by giving re-descriptions of situations that make the actions of individuals and groups plausible. This is how we can, for example, characterise what happens when we re-describe situations through the lens of Foucault, Bourdieu, Lave and Wenger, or gender: we re-describe such situations as a 'case of,' for example, pastoral power, misrecognition, legitimate peripheral participations, or stereotypical gender relationships.

This, obviously, is theoretical work and it plays an important role in interpretative research, and given that we have argued that this mode of research is inevitable in educational research, it means that these forms of theorising are, in a sense, themselves inevitable. But there are two important questions to be asked in relation to this. One is: What are we doing when we engage in these forms of theorising, that is, when we are saying that we are trying to 'add plausibility'? The other is: Why would we engage in such forms of theoretical work? What is our motivation, ambition and agenda?

4. Adding Plausibility? Making The Strange Familiar Or Making The Familiar Strange

The idea that, through theorising, we 'add plausibility' to the accounts and articulations of individuals and groups is an important and well-rehearsed justification for the conduct of interpretative research. 'Plausibility' refers to the idea that we try to 'make sense' of the situations we encounter. But the 'adding' is important as well, since interpretations never simply copy or reproduce what is already there; they add a 'layer' or 'dimension' – or perhaps one should say in more neutral terms: they add text, they re-present. This strategy is sometimes referred to as that of *making the strange familiar*, i.e., trying to see something as a case of something we already (claim to) know and understand. 'Adding plausibility' is also related to the claim that interpretative research can 'deepen' and 'broaden' the experiences, articulations and interpretations of actors. But both notions – 'plausibility' and 'addition' – raise further questions. One crucial question is of

course *whose* plausibility we are adding when we engage in theorising in interpretative research. The other question is whether we should use metaphors like 'deepen' and 'broaden' to articulate what we are doing when we engage in theorising, as these notions seem to suggest that theorising not simply adds something but also hints at an addition that is better. Is theorising therefore *additional*? Or is it just *different*?

It is at this point that there is an important difference between interpretative and emancipatory or critical approaches. Whereas those working within an interpretative approach would probably see their theoretical work as a way to contribute to the available interpretations of social actors and thus would see this as that of offering alternative and additional interpretations, those working from a critical approach have a 'higher' ambition than just offering alternative interpretations. Their aim is to offer *better* interpretations than those generated by the social actors themselves, on the assumption that such first person interpretations may be distorted as a result of the workings of power, or, in more traditional critical language, as a result of the social position of actors. The demarcation line between interpretative and critical forms of theorising thus separates those who aim to *add* interpretations to those of social actors themselves from those who aim to *replace* actor interpretations. While the ambition of both might be expressed in terms of 'adding plausibility', there is a fundamental difference in how 'plausibility' is understood. The difference between 'traditional' and 'critical' forms of theorising – that is between traditional and critical theory (Horkheimer, 1937) – therefore not only lies in the form and content of theorising, but also in the *ambition* of theory and theorising. Whereas interpretative research would see theorising as contributing to reflection and learning, critical theory aims at a very particular set of learning processes, viz., those that lead to insight in how power and social position 'structure' experience, articulation and interpretation. This also means that these modes of theorising are based upon a different relationship between researcher and researched (or theoriser and theorised). Critical research, so we might say, has to start from a fundamental distrust in first person experiences and articulations, whereas interpretative research has no reason to start from distrust (see Biesta, 2010b).

While there is, therefore, a fundamental difference between the role of theory in interpretative and critical-emancipatory research, both can still be characterised by the ambition to make the strange – that is what is not known or not understood – familiar, that is, bringing the strange into the sphere of what is already known and understood. The assumption here is that, if we have a better understanding of ourselves and the situations we are in, this will or may have a positive impact on our abilities to act. We are deliberately vague in our language here in order to capture the commonalities of interpretative and critical forms of theorising, although they do differ in their views about what constitutes a 'better' understanding and how and by whom such understandings can be generated. By indicating the 'gesture' that unites interpretative and critical approaches we can, in turn, outline a different role for theory in research, one that does not aim to make what is strange familiar, but

rather has the ambition to make what is familiar strange.

One theorist who has explored the idea of research as a practice of making the familiar strange most explicitly is Michel Foucault.[6] Although Foucault can be read – and often is read – as a theorist of power, his contribution is first and foremost a critique of critical theory and of a modern view of emancipation (see Biesta, 2008). The central notion in this regard is what Foucault writes as 'power/knowledge'. Modern views of emancipation are based on the assumption that power and knowledge are separate so that we can use knowledge and understanding to expose and eventually overcome the workings of power – the truth will make us free. What Foucault aims to express with the idea of power/knowledge is that power and knowledge never occur separately. For Foucault power and knowledge always come together and this is the reason why he has argued that we should abandon 'the whole tradition that allows us to imagine that knowledge can only exist where the power relations are suspended' (Foucault, 1975, p. 27). To argue that we have to abandon this particular tradition is not to suggest that change is no longer possible, but is to highlight that we are always operating *within* power/knowledge 'constellations' – that is, of power/knowledge 'against' power/knowledge – and not of knowledge versus power or power versus knowledge. Knowledge/representation and power/intervention are entailed by each other rather than separate from each other within an either/or logic. To challenge an existing educational order therefore requires the ordering of an alternative – of a 'counter practice' (Biesta, 1998).

Some have read Foucault as saying that we will forever be caught in power and that no escape is possible, yet such a reading only makes sense as long as one assumes that a position outside of the confines of power is possible. This is precisely what Foucault denies. This does not mean, however, that action, change and critique are no longer possible, but that they take a different form. Foucault formulates the critical question and the task for theory and theorising as follows: '(I)n what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints?' (Foucault, 1984, p. 45). Foucault refers to this strategy as 'eventalisation' (Foucault, 1991, p. 76). This, however, is not a process of understanding, of bringing what is strange into the domain of the known, but a 'breach of selfevidence' (ibid.). Foucault thus sees the task of research as that of 'making visible a singularity in places where there is a temptation to invoke a historical constant, an immediate anthropological trait, an obviousness which imposes itself uniformly on all' (ibid.). Rather than coming up with a single explanation, eventalisation works by constructing around the singular event a 'polygon of intelligibility' (Foucault, 1991, p. 77). Eventalisation is therefore not aimed at uncovering a deeper truth about what is going on, but rather urges researchers to *pluralise* and *complicate* understandings, articulations and interpretations. This means that the theoretical work needed for such an effort is not about bringing what is strange into the domain of understanding – theory rather has the task of generating more and different understandings.

5. 'Autonomous' Theorising

Whereas the focus of the discussion so far has been on forms of theory and ways of theorising in the context of empirical research, there is also theoretical work in education that is not directly or immediately connected to empirical research. Rather than referring to this kind of theorising as non-empirical we suggest calling it 'autonomous' theorising. The primary aim of this kind of theoretical work is what, following Richard Rorty (1989), we might refer to as the *re-description* of educational processes and practices. We use the notion of re-description in order to highlight the fact that educational processes and practices always already are described in particular ways. What theoretical work can do is to provide different, alternative descriptions of such processes and practices. It can suggest, for example, that learning to learn is either a strategy that empowers students or a form of governmentality that contributes to disempowerment. It can re-describe strategies to support the inclusion of students with special educational needs as processes of exclusion (Allan, 2008). It can suggest that assessment should not be seen as a way to judge learning outcomes but rather as a way to generate such outcomes.

Such more autonomous forms of theorising can, on the one hand, provide important starting points for empirical research first and foremost with regard to the *conceptualisation* of the phenomena one wishes to investigate. While researchers may wish to study learning, it is only after they have engaged with the question of how to conceptualise learning – for example, as information processing, as behavioural change, as acquisition of knowledge, as participation in social practices – that it becomes possible to make decisions about what it is one needs to focus on and collect data about (which, in turn, feeds into decisions about methodology, design and methods). Some researchers, often those working at the interpretative end of the research spectrum, object to bringing theory in at the start of research as they feel it would bias the research findings and would blind researchers from seeing potentially relevant aspects that fall outside one's particular frame. While it is, of course, always important to remain open in research, this particular objection fails to see that the world – and more specifically the social world – never appears *un*conceptualised so that not to engage with the ways in which one can conceptualise one's research object runs the risk of uncritically accepting prevalent definitions and conceptions of the object under investigation. Yet to conceptualise learning as, for example, a response in no way defines what one will find through empirical investigation when starting from that assumption. In this regard (the role of theory in) conceptualisation never replaces the need for empirical work.

More autonomous forms of theorising have, on the other hand, also a more direct practical significance, particularly where such forms of theorising help us to see things differently, so that it becomes possible to see the particular choices implied in existing descriptions and representations. More autonomous forms of theorising can help us to see, for example, that the language of learning is only one way to talk in and about education – a way, moreover, that makes some ways of thinking and speaking about education possible and makes other ways of thinking and speaking about education, and ultimately ways of 'doing' education, more difficult or even

impossible (see Biesta, 2006).

6. Towards An Agenda For Research And Practice In Capacity Building
The foregoing attempt to map some of the usages of theory in the field of education is not meant to be exhaustive but is being presented as a first step towards a more nuanced understanding of the different ways in which theory operates in relation to educational research and, to a lesser extent, also in relation to educational practice. Our paper is premised on the assumption that it is only when we have an understanding of *what* theory is doing or might do, that we can begin to outline *how* we might build capacity with regard to theory. While there is a whole industry of literature on the methods and methodologies of educational and social research – so that, in a sense, it is quite obvious what capacity building with regard to methods and methodologies needs to focus on – there is far less available on the roles of theory in such research. Since what has been presented in this paper is only a first step, further development of capacity building with regard to theory needs to be informed by a more nuanced and detailed understanding of both the *possible* and, more importantly, the *actual* roles of theory and theorising in educational research. What is needed, therefore, is not so much more theoretical and philosophical reflection on the uses of theory – and maybe most of the work currently available is confined to such reflection – but first of all systematic empirical and historical investigations into the kinds of theory and forms of theorising that are being used in educational research. Investigations, moreover, that not simply aim to describe and map, but also aim to develop a sense of how theory 'works', what it makes possible and also what it makes difficult or even impossible.

Such work should not be confined to the domain of educational *research*, as theory also plays an important role in educational *practice*. There is, therefore, also a need to engage in a more systematic exploration of the forms of theory and ways of theorising that play a role in educational practices, again in order to map usage and generate understanding of what theory and theorising are 'doing'. This is not only important for the enhancement of what we might term the 'practical' use of theory in education. Given that educational practices are not theory-free zones but are likely to be imbued by theory and may well be theory-generating themselves (see, for example, Whitehead 1989), it is also important to have an understanding of what theory is doing in educational practices. This is partly so as these practices constitute sites for educational research. But the theories that 'circulate' in educational practices also play an important mediating role in the uptake of insights from research.

This suggests that capacity building with regard to theory needs more research on the actual roles of theory in educational research and educational practice and this, so we wish to suggest, is an important part of the agenda for capacity building as there is a continued challenge to improve our understanding of what it is that we need to build capacity in. But at the same time there are important practical questions to be asked about the aims and ends of such capacity building and the ways in which capacity with regard to theory might be built. Let us be clear here

that our interest is first and foremost in the improvement of empirical educational research and in the need to complement all the activities that focus on the methods and methodologies of research with a similar set of activities that focuses on the theoretical dimensions of research. We are not advocating, therefore, that capacity building with regard to theory should focus on what we have called 'autonomous theorising'. We do not think, in other words, that the capacity building that is needed should focus on philosophy or sociology or psychology if, that is, the focus would be entirely 'theoretical', that is, disconnected from empirical research (which also raises an important challenge regarding the ways in which such forms of autonomous theorising can connect better to empirical research and educational practice). We also do not think that capacity building with regard to theory should focus on meta-theory and methodology or what some call the philosophy or the foundations of educational and social research. And perhaps this is one of the main mistakes (beginning) educational researchers often make, in that they conflate the theoretical framework for their research, that is, the theory or theories needed to conceptualise the object of investigation and to interpret empirical findings, with the philosophical assumptions – assumptions about knowledge and reality – that inform their research. The key challenge, so we wish to suggest, is to focus the attention on *object-theory*, that is, the theories we use to conceptualise the phenomena in which we are interested and the theories we use to 'make sense' of empirical findings (in the broad and divergent ways in which such sense-making can take place; see above).

That is where the focus of attempts to build capacity with regard to theory – for example through formal courses, through seminars, master-classes or research apprenticeships – should be. It needs to start, therefore, from real examples of real research and, based on an *informed* understanding of the possible roles of theory, explore what the role of theory in such research is, how it impacts on the design and outcomes of the research, what alternatives were considered but not chosen, and how the particular theoretical framing has contributed to the overall quality of the research. The capacity that needs to be built here is not simply about knowledge and expertise but also requires the development of a capacity for judgement about the theoretical dimensions of educational research: judgement about the selection of theory; judgement about the utilisation of theory; and ongoing judgement about the contribution of the theoretical dimensions of the research to its overall quality. What is perhaps most needed, therefore, in capacity building with regard to theory, is the promotion of what, following Eisner (1998), we wish to refer to as 'theoretical connoisseurship' – the ability to make wise and informed judgements about the theoretical dimensions of educational research.

One final point we wish to make has to do with the question of where the theoretical resources for the conduct of educational research should come from. In Britain, but also in North America and other English speaking countries, there is a strong tradition in which education is seen as an interdisciplinary field that gets its theoretical resources from a range of 'other' disciplines, including psychology, sociology, philosophy and history (see Furlong and Lawn, 2010; McCulloch, 2002).

This particular construction is quite different from how the field of educational studies has developed in Continental Europe, particularly in German speaking countries. Here there is a long-standing tradition in which education is seen as an academic discipline in its own right, with its own forms of theory and theorising (see Biesta, 2011). The question this raises, both for educational research and for capacity building, is what the differences between the two approaches are with regard to the roles of theory and also whether it might be important to consider the possibility of forms of theory and theorising that are distinctly *educational* in character, rather than that they are generated through 'other' academic disciplines. This is why it is important to engage with the task of capacity building in the domain of theory in a way that is international, comparative and historical in outlook, so as to be able to recognise the different ways in which the study of education has developed in different countries and settings and learn from the different ways in which different forms of theory play a role in the study of education (see, for example, Gundem and Hopmann, 2002; Horn, 2003; Keiner, 2002).

At the *Laboratory for Educational Theory* (www.theorylab.co.uk) at the School of Education of the University of Stirling we have made a start with developing an infrastructure for capacity building in the domain of theory. Through the organisation of local, national and international seminars, a biennial international conference, courses and programmes for doctoral students, and other events we have begun to explore some of the issues mentioned in this paper in a more systematic manner and have started to engage the international educational research community in the conversation about theory. Discussions with students and scholars from many different countries have not only confirmed our view that the question of theory in educational research and educational practice is of crucial importance for the promotion of high quality research and good and just educational practice, but has also shown that capacity building in this domain is as important and urgent as capacity building with regard to methods and methodologies.

Endnotes

[1] TLRP – the Teaching and Learning Research Programme – was a large scale strategic co-ordinated research effort aimed at improving the quality of educational research in the UK (see www.tlrp.org).

[2] The ESRC – the Economic and Social Research Council – is the major funder of educational and social research in the UK.

[3] The Research Assessment Exercise is a UK-wide evaluation of the quality of research outputs, environments and impact of all academic research in the UK. The exercise is conducted every seven or eight years. The RAE started in the 1990s and the next cycle – renamed Research Excellence Framework – is due to take place in 2013.

[4] While Thomas (2007) provides a sustained critique of the role of theory in educational research and educational practice, he focuses almost exclusively on reasons why there should be 'less theory' (pp. 142–168) and makes very little effort to indicate where and how theory might actually be useful or even necessary. While the verdict on how much theory a field like education needs remains open, we do think that it is important to start such a discussion with an accurate understanding of the (potential) roles of theory – which is what we aim to provide in this paper.

[5] It is therefore unrealistic to demand, as Thomas (2007, p. 24) does, that '"theory" as a word must

be one thing or another [and] cannot – if it is to be used seriously to describe a particular kind of intellectual construction in education – have two or more meanings.'

[6] It is important to note that we are not presenting Foucault here as one of the possible theories that can be used *in* educational research, but as articulating a particular approach to and understanding of (social and educational) research. The discussion of Foucault in this section is, to put it differently, one at the level of meta-theory or methodology, not at the level of object-theory.

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