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Exploring the theory-practice gap in initial teacher education: Moving beyond questions of relevance to issues of power and authority

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Abstract

The ‘theory-practice divide’ in teacher education can be viewed not simply as an acceptance of a body of knowledge but instead an acceptance of the teacher educator’s authority to determine what is relevant educational theory. This research aimed to explore student teachers’ views of ‘educational theory’ and how it was discursively positioned relative to their practice in an attempt to examine whether their acceptance or rejection of it was also related to accepting the authority of the teacher educator. Using one-to-one interviews with 23 student teachers and employing a discourse analysis, four categories of students emerged. The paper describes these four categories and discusses the implications of these findings for initial teacher education and our understanding of the ‘theory-practice’ gap.

Keywords: Theory-practice gap; student teacher; authority; teacher power bases; discourse analysis

1. Introduction

Addressing the so called ‘Theory-Practice divide’ in teacher education has been given considerable attention over the years (Korthagen, 2007; Cheng, Cheng, and Tang, 2010; Knight, 2015). As the term suggests, this ‘theory-practice divide’ is one that positions

practice as somewhat detached from theory, however, while recognising the value that various theoretical lenses can provide teachers, there is no agreed body of theoretical knowledge within the international teacher education community. There are a number of broad areas of similarity drawing on disciplines, such as psychology, sociology and philosophy, however, the specific ways in which these areas are integrated, and what is defined as teachers' professional knowledge-base, are often dependent on national factors influenced by statutory requirements and accreditation criteria. For example, in Ireland the self-regulated Teaching Council of Ireland established in 2006 accredits all of the national teacher accreditation programmes and determines the proportion of time that a programme should spend on school placement, pedagogical content knowledge, and on general educational studies, however it does not specify the curriculum for the education studies component (Teaching Council of Ireland 2011). Institutional factors are also influential and can determine the depth and breadth of treatment of different aspects of educational theory at a local level. For example, institutions may pay particular attention to different dimensions ranging from reflective practice or exposure to critical pedagogy or educational psychology. 'Educational Theory' as a defined body of knowledge therefore has ill-defined boundaries.

As such, engagement with this 'educational theory' may not necessarily reflect one's rejection or acceptance of this body of knowledge but could rather reflect a willingness to accept the authority of those that have defined this knowledge base. In essence, does a student teacher assent to the authority of the 'teacher educator' to define what relevant theoretical knowledge is for teachers? Viewed through this lens of 'knowledge as power' (Foucault, 1982), the 'theory-practice divide' can be viewed not as a simple acceptance of relevant knowledge but instead an acceptance of the authority of others to determine what knowledge is relevant.

To examine this issue this study aimed to explore how student teachers talk about ‘educational theory’. As well as examining whether the student teachers spoke positively or negatively about educational theory, the study also aimed to explore how educational theory was discursively positioned when spoken about it, i.e., whether they saw it as something ‘out there’, distant from their practice or whether it was internalised and seen as central to their professional practice. This discursive positioning, we argue, can provide an insight into the extent to which they have internalised the educational theory and see it as central to their professional practice or whether they continue to position it external to themselves as remaining part of the institution or those that present it. Therefore two key questions guided this study, namely:

- To what extent do student teachers see educational theory as beneficial?
- When speaking about ‘educational theory’ how do student teachers discursively position it within their educational practice?

2. Research context

In exploring the theory-practice gap in teacher education many reasons for the apparent disconnect emerge: these include the quest for academic legitimacy, epistemological and ontological differences, previous schooling experiences and issues associated with power and authority. So as to provide a brief context the first three of the above reasons are outlined before turning in greater depth to exploring issues associated with power and authority which are central to the current study.

The first reason for the apparent theory-practice gap is a result of the quest for legitimacy of educational theory within the academic milieu. For example, Carr’s (2006, 138) discussion of the historical foundations of educational theory describes its inception in the nineteenth century, with the appropriation of philosophical texts such as Plato’s (2003)

Republic or Rousseau's (2007) *Emile*, as 'nothing less than an act of gross historical misrepresentation' in order to achieve a sense of academic legitimacy. Similarly, Goodson and Hargreaves (1996) discuss the 'devil's bargain' engaged in by teacher education departments to acquiesce to the University milieu and gain academic status within it. This quest for legitimacy and status has arguably resulted in distancing educational theory from teachers' practice and the realities of the classrooms.

A second reason is epistemologically and ontologically rooted. The epistemologies of student teachers can often differ greatly from the dominant epistemology of a teacher education institution. Pre-service teachers' often adopt the modernist principle that human beings do not differ greatly and are essentially the same which often differs from the core ontological belief of teacher educators (Sugrue, 1997). Often it is student teachers' ontological beliefs that essentially determine what they perceive as "working" and the criteria by which the evidence for this is determined (Sugrue, 1997). The complexity underlying theoretical frameworks for practitioners is often underestimated by practitioners who are unprepared for understanding humans as social beings (with the complicated ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin social interactions) (Freuchting, 2010). Therefore the legitimacy of teacher educators can often be undermined by pre-service teachers' conception that the knowledge being communicated to them is not perceived as valid due to a simplistic understanding of humans as social beings. This disjoint between personal ontological beliefs and a professional theoretical knowledge base is shared by other professions as often the practical knowledge base of any practitioner is bound within their ontological reality first and a theoretical framework second (Freuchting, 2010).

A third challenge associated with the theory-practice divide relates to the long apprenticeship of observation of teaching (Lortie, 1975). This apprenticeship can significantly 'frame' assumptions about 'ideal' ways to practice or archetypes to aspire to

(Corlett, 2000). For teachers these teaching archetypes or “lay theories” (Sugrue, 1997) of teaching based on their own schooling experiences often inhibit their engagement with theory as new theories can be narrowly assessed through the lens of past experiences. In essence, student teachers may intend to teach as they were taught and therefore dismiss educational theory that challenges this intention.

A fourth reason for the theory-practice gap, and more specifically student teachers’ acceptance or rejection of educational theory, relates to the acceptance of the authority of the teacher educator to define what is appropriate educational knowledge. Defining what is ‘appropriate’ and ‘relevant’ educational theory within an ill-defined discipline highlights the dimensions of power underpinning teacher educational curricula. In the Foucauldian sense, the educational theory espoused by teacher educators could be seen as ‘a means of controlling what is permitted to count as knowledge’ (Thomas, 1997, 88). From this perspective student teachers acceptance or rejection of educational theory may have little to do with its perceived relevance and instead may reflect their willingness to accept the authority of the teacher educator in determining what is legitimate and relevant ‘educational theory’.

By what authority then can teacher educators claim authority about their subject matter? And why would student teachers concede to this authority?

Student teachers may legitimate a teacher educator’s authority through the same criteria that they intend to claim authority when they become qualified teachers. This teacher authority can be viewed through their ‘epistemic’ capacity to be perceived as knowledgeable (Tirri and Puolimatka 2000) or ‘culturally appropriate pedagogical and interpersonal authority’ (Lai et al. 2015, 429) to ensure student compliance. Given the complex nature of how a teacher, or a teacher educator, alludes to power over their students, French and Raven's (1968) bases of power provides a well-defined framework through which to answer these two

questions. While proposed several decades ago it continues to enjoy wide appeal and application in looking at teacher authority in the literature (Finn, 2012; Hawamdeh 2013; 2014 Ozer et al.). According to their framework social power, and in this case teacher educators' power, can be drawn from their competence and knowledge (expert power base), their status as 'teacher educators' within the institution (legitimate power base), their abilities to impose rewards or sanctions of students (reward/coercive power base) and their ability to relate to others (referent power base).

The *expert power base* proposed by French and Raven has similarities with Raz's (1979) conception of a 'theoretical authority'. This conception views authority as belonging to those with greater expertise and knowledge than another. Yet authority can be further complicated if the utility of the advice is not recognised. By Raz's (1979) conception, authority might be willingly conceded by an individual as an act of faith that the advice or directions will eventually act in their best interest. From this Razian notion, authority may be conceded by a student teacher to teacher educators if the espoused theory is viewed as, or will be, beneficial to them.

Working from a *legitimate power base*, acceptance of what the teacher educator defines as educational theory is dependent on the student teacher accepting the position of the teacher educator as having the 'formal authority' to determine what is relevant knowledge. In this instance the perceived status of the institution providing the teacher education programme can clash with the perceived challenges associated with the school placement setting.

In this context, student teachers' acceptance, or rejection, of theory may reflect their acceptance or rejection of the legitimate power base (authority) of the teacher educator. Hence their rejection of it may reflect a rejection of the legitimacy of the teacher educator's authority rather than a perceived irrelevance of the theory. However, if student teachers

accept the legitimate power base of the teacher educator, they may accept educational theory without any critique of the merits of the actual theory.

3. Methodology

The participants of the study were 23 student teachers from the second, third and fourth year cohorts of their four-year concurrent teacher education programme at a University in the Republic of Ireland (RoI). There were approximately 750 student teachers enrolled across all three year groups. Initial teacher education in Ireland for post-primary teaching (yrs. 12-18) is provided via four-year undergraduate concurrent programmes or two-year Professional Masters programmes. The four-year undergraduate programme in this study specialised in the teaching of Science, Physical Education, Languages and Technology. Entry on to the programme was normally based on the students' performance in the Leaving Certificate Examination at the end of their post-primary education, which acts as a matriculation exam for entry to third level. Teaching continues to enjoy a relatively high status within Ireland and the students enrolled on the programme would be considered relatively high performing students in this matriculation exam. As a concurrent degree student teachers acquire both degree content (subject specialist knowledge) as well as exposure to education related modules exploring education theory. These educational modules have a wide and varied focus from lesson planning and behaviour management to educational change and socio-political issues in education. In general, issues explored in the early part of the programme tended to focus on classroom practice whereas towards the latter end of the degree programme students would explore broader socio-political issues in education.

The research was conducted after the end of the academic year, during students' summer leave. This resulted in an understandably low volunteer response. The entire student cohort

of 750 students was invited via email to participate. 23 positive responses were received from students that were available within a short commuting distance from the university and willing to engage in one-to-one interviews over the summer months

Ethical approval for the study was sought from and granted by the authors institution. All participants were provided with a research information sheet in advance of the study outlining the research and were asked to give their consent to participate in a recorded 45-minute one-to-one semi-structured interview conducted with an independent researcher not involved in the programme delivery. Questions were asked relating to what came to mind about the term ‘educational theory’ and its merits, or lack thereof, as well as being asked to explain if there were specific educational theories that they found of relevance.

In analysing the transcripts from the interviews a discourse analysis from the discursive psychological tradition was adopted (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Cognisant of the many approaches to discourse analysis, the study adopted a discursive psychological framework. Discursive psychological analysis draws on many of the concepts associated with discourse analysis in general but applies them to psychological theories. We employed this approach as this analytical approach best captures the internalisation of educational theory and extent to which they personally constructed its meaning within their discourse. To explore the student teachers’ views of educational theory, the analysis paid particular attention to the common tropes and phrases (interpretative repertoires) (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984), that were drawn on to describe educational theory. The presence of such phrases and sayings can indicate a superficial critique of ‘educational theory’ rather than a considered evaluation of its merits.

In exploring the second research aim particular attention was given to how educational theory was discursively positioned. This positionality (Davies and Harré, 1990) within the discourse, we argue, can indicate the extent to which the student teachers accept the relevance of the associated theories and whether they have adopted them as part of their professional

practice. From the perspective of the reflexivity of language, in which utterances are not simply describing but doing something, we posit that discursive positioning of educational theory as distant, external or coming from other sources is an active process of distancing the individual from the educational theory. In this regard student teachers may speak positively about ‘educational theory’ but may position it, relative to their practice, very differently. All of the research team analysed all of the transcripts and compared how they coded them to enhance the validity of the emerging findings (Cresswell and Miller, 2000). Individual participants in the findings are identified by their assigned number (indicated by PX: P1 was the first to be interviewed, and is represented as ‘1’ on Fig. 1 later in the findings), their sex (M/F), and the year group cohort that they are a part of (Y1, Y2, Y3, Y4).

4. Findings

When participants were asked what came to mind when they heard the word ‘educational theory’ there was a range of responses, from those that expressed quite negative views towards it to those that saw it as positive. Negative comments tended to draw on prevailing tropes and sayings. For example, one participant claimed, *‘I think a lot of it is “up in the cloud” type stuff’* (P5, M, Y4). More positive responses made reference to how educational theory was *‘helpful’* and how it could be applied in the classroom. Some participants (n=6) expressing a positive view firstly positioned themselves away from the negative criticism of it, such as *‘A lot of people are saying that they [educational theory modules] are pointless, useless, that there is no point in doing them’* (P1, F, Y3). A number (n=2) expressed a more neutral view indicating that it had merit and might be helpful in their future careers.

The analysis of the participant responses focused on how they positioned educational theory within their discourse and for the majority of students, educational theory was positioned external to their own practice. This positioning was both temporal and spatial in

nature. The temporal aspect was evident when its applicability was related to future careers as opposed to present use. One participant noted for example that, *'I'm, kind of, thinking it will be beneficial, it will be helpful'* (P1, F, Y3). However the most significant evidence of positioning were the numerous participants who positioned it as *'outside the classroom'* and *'in college'*. This separation of the students' university experience and their school placement was evident in one respondent that said, *'Theory when I think in a university setting, I think of education papers and something that works on paper but then the practicality of them in the classroom? I don't know'* (P5, M, Y4).

Theory was also positioned away from the students' experience by distancing the origins of the theories. One student claimed that educational theories come from, *'experts in the field'* (P3, M, Y4), while another similarly noted that educational theory was, *'what all the different researchers have said on stuff'* (P4, F, Y4).

A further analysis was conducted to establish the extent to which students, that expressed positive views of educational theory, were also likely to position it as part of, as opposed to distant, from their practice. From this perspective, four categories of students potentially existed. i.e. students that expressed a positive or negative opinions about educational theory and positioned it as part of or distant from their practice (See figure 1). This figure contains the position of each participant in this framework. This figure also contains the labels given to each category, i.e., number assigned, year of study (Y2, Y3, Y4) and sex (M/F). This information on order, year and sex is provided for clarity and transparency regarding the variance across the participants. However, analysis was not intentionally conducted to compare any particular sub-groups of participants. It is worth noting that the interviews were carried out at the end of the academic year, so the year group attributed to the participant indicates also the number of years of teacher education completed.

[INSERT FIG 1. HERE]

Figure 1. Distribution of participants as assigned by quadrant

The following sections describe these categories of students by drawing on examples from each category.

4.1 Rejecters – Automatic Dismissives

A large number of students (n=6) were categorised as ‘rejecters’ due to their negative opinions of educational theory, coupled with the manner in which they discursively positioned educational theory as distant from their practice.

The student teachers in this category did not draw on a considered critique, but rather tended to use a higher concentration of tropes and phrases when expressing their, generally negative, opinions of educational theory. These superficial critiques tended to draw upon personal feelings rather than considered arguments. For example, one participant stated that, with regard to educational theory, her *‘gut feeling is negative’* (P1, F, Y3) and she *‘wouldn’t be the biggest advocate of a lot of the education modules’* (P1, F, Y3). Like other student teachers who were interviewed, she qualified her negative feelings towards theory by suggesting that *‘a lot of people’* take a similar view, that education studies modules *‘are pointless, useless’* and that *‘there is no point in doing them’* (P1, F, Y3). Others described their entrenched pre-conceptions drawing on more sayings and tropes in their speech such as *‘I am not a huge fan of educational theory’* (P5, M, Y4). Engagement with theory was limited for some (n=3) and used to explain, rather than inform, educative practices, *‘theory only influenced [me] when there was an issue, when there was some failing that [I] couldn’t figure out’* (P5, M, Y4).

Participants in this category often cited that their practice was dictated largely by their *'own common sense'* or *'own school experience'* (P18, M, Y3). Although some (n=2) did cede the authority of teacher educators' experience within the education sector and educational research as *'they have been through the systems, they know what the systems are inside and out'* (P18, M, Y4). However, the legitimacy of the educational theory they were exposed to was diminished as being ideal and removed from the practical considerations of schooling as *'something that works in a perfect world...and there is no perfect classroom'* (P18, M, Y4) with some describing it as entirely *'irrelevant'* (P15, M, Y4).

4.2 Acceptors – Automatic Adopters

Student teachers who were categorised as the “acceptors” appeared to take a positive view of educational theory but still appeared to position theory as external to themselves and their practice. Much like the “rejecters”, their rationale and critique remained superficial in nature. Use of tropes and phrases was evident, although to a lesser extent, as students supplanted these commonly used phrases in place of somewhat more considered arguments. Sometimes participants would highlight their acceptance of theory as being different from their counterparts who, they say, continue to reject theory. For example, one participant in this category prefaced his opinions by positioning himself as somewhat unique in his acceptance of educational theory: *'Everyone thinks it is a load of rubbish (laugh)...but from myself, I do find it interesting'* (P6, M, Y4), arguing that educational theory warranted acceptance on the basis that it was based on research and evidence but he discursively positioned it as external to his practice.

Despite finding theory to be beneficial, participants in this category stand out in the way that they still positioned theory as something external to them. That is to say that

participants spoke about theory as though it exists in the university or as specifically echoed by three participants as '*out there*' (P6, M, Y4; P11, M, Y4; P23, M, Y3) in the context of emanating from other people, such as, teacher educators or researchers. The educational theory of a teacher education curricula was described positively but imposed by teacher educators as it was what she was '*meant to learn from in order to improve my teaching*' (P23, M, Y3). She further added that she, '*didn't let [her]self get too bogged down in theory*' but felt that there were some occasions where they '*would go to theory for help*' or '*fall back on theory*' (P23, M, Y3).

4.3 Embracers - Considered adopters

Although in a minority, some participants (n=2) appeared to internalise educational theory after a degree of critical analysis and expressed largely positive views about it. These have been labelled as "embracers". For example, one participant described a distinct dichotomy between how other student teachers '*separate theory work and practical work*' but she had developed her own conception reflecting that, '*I think practical work is a way of learning theory*' (P16, F, Y3).

Another "embracer" described the positive aspects of educational theory not in terms of content but in its capacity to prompt analysis of classroom situations and pedagogical activities as '*it mightn't always work or it mightn't always be applicable to every class but I think gets the student teacher thinking about, you know, what actually is possible within a lesson*' (P2, M, Y4). Aspects of educational theory such as 'educational psychology' was influential to help frame his conception of the classroom context and having inherent merit as it was considered '*quite interesting...[and] even just casually reading about it would... make you more aware of the pupils that are in the class and pupils that you're teaching*' (P2, M,

Y4). The language used to describe educational issues conveyed the extent to which he had internalised educational theory specifically '*the neoliberal agenda*' as it was '*something that I wouldn't have been kind of aware of until we actually, you know, studied it*' (P2, M, Y4).

This was personally significant for him as he was aware of his colleagues who, '*have gone to interviews over [in England and] they have said how straightaway that's the first thing that hit them, was the module on the neoliberal agenda*'. His conversations with his peers led him to describe how teachers were '*just like office clerks*' and the education system as '*real, like product driven, you know?*' (P2, M, Y4). He also implicitly communicated much of the theory he had been exposed to in his capacity to critique current educational practices:

I think that even if you have a pupil who was critically thinking about science, or whatever, topic it may be, I think, that they would probably end up doing much better in an exam and when they go to third level rather than just rote learning and aiming for the points (P2, M, Y4)

4.4 Resisters - Considered dismissives

Finally, some participants (n=2) had clearly internalised the educational theory despite speaking of it largely in negative terms, these we have labelled “resisters”. Unlike the “rejecters” however, the negative comments about educational theory tended to draw on more thoughtful, considered perspectives: often drawing on the very theories they spoke negatively about to articulate their answers. For example, for one participant, educational theory was the reproduction of the hegemonic technical-rationalist (Habermas 1984) position ‘*we are just learning stuff to pass the exams and hopefully retain some of the stuff for when we are teaching*’ and viewed as similar to the secondary education curricula which was described as ‘*Just throwing information at people and just sit down and listen and take in information and pass the exam*’ (P17, F, Y2). She acknowledged the agendas of teacher educators, and pedagogical activities used to explain educational theory, which she believed undermined their legitimacy as ‘*there is too much discrepancy between educational theory and the way that we are learning ourselves in college*’ which was largely due to the ‘*lecturers talking about their own kind of theories or information*’ (P17, F, Y2). Despite the largely negative disposition towards educational theory and her experience of teacher education she did credit these modules with developing in her ‘*a better understanding of the way things are and what education should be for...[as] it just seemed like education is there for the sake of education as it is*’ (P17, F, Y2). She provided a nuanced critique of the education system reflecting much of the educational theory he had been exposed to. Her perception of what an education system should be to help ‘*making people understand their surroundings or understand what is going around them*’ and as the current educational system as ‘*it isn’t promoting a thinking process...[where] there is no, kind of, critical thinking, there is no problem solving. People*

don't know the reasons behind things...[and] it is just learning off things to keep other people happy' (P17, F, Y2).

Another participant shared a criticism of the irrelevance of theory as something that is utopian and *'it is grand in a lovely classroom setting where we have facilities and everything is working out perfect'* (P21, M, Y3). He did concede the self-fulfilling prophecy of some of his peers as some *'teachers don't do too well in education because they don't...want it to work'* (P21, M, Y3).

He did acknowledge that maybe teacher education institutions might explicate worthwhile methodologies or ideas but *'I think a lot of the time it is out of the control of teachers, even lecturers... they are trying to change but at the end of the day, we can try but there is always going to be a limit on how much we can actually change, how much we can incorporate the theory into it?'* (P21, M, Y3). Despite the irrelevance he cited in much of the theory, the inherent merit of theoretical frameworks in expanding student teachers' horizons was described whereby *'even a lot of the stuff we did in education that I thought wasn't going to work I still liked because it opened our minds to different options'* (P21, M, Y3). This was attributed not simply to the educational theory they were exposed to but how it was communicated to them *'It is more of a mind-set I thought, than actual the theory itself. Training your mind to, kind of, think critically, I think, is the most important thing we have done...learning theory in education'* (P21, M, Y3). He felt this gave him the capacity to critique the espoused merits of an educational theory or methodology as *'I was able to think...I had an opinion on it and reason why I thought it wasn't going to work. Instead of just blatantly accepting it'* (P21, M, Y3).

4.5 Migrating students

In attempting to categorise all participants there were a number that could not be easily attributed to a particular quadrant. The largest number ($n=8$) of these was placed on the central axis between positive and negative views (Figure 1). Significantly however, educational theory was consistently externalised in their discourse suggesting that perhaps this group were moving away from an automatic rejection of the educational theory towards recognising the value of it in their practice.

5. Discussion of findings - Accepting theory: authority versus expertise?

Traditional conceptions of student teachers' adoption of educational theory has tended to place them along a continuum ranging from those that recognise its value to those that reject it. For example, a recent study by Sjolie (2014) has categorised different conceptions by student teachers of the role of theory within teacher education such as it can: make practice explicit; expand their horizons; prescribe practice; act as a professional knowledge base; be explicitly divorced from practice; and implicit within actions. Although a useful categorisation of student teachers perception of the relevance of theory, and similar to many other studies (Cheng et al. 2010; Knight 2015), they do not explicitly explore the perceived authority upon which teacher educators make their claims. Moving beyond the lens of 'relevancy', reconceptualising the acceptance or rejection of educational theory from the perspective of authority has added an alternative perspective.

The analysis of the students' discourse (and in particular the discursive processes used to position educational theory relative to their own practice) suggests that we need to look beyond student teachers' expressed views of its relevance as these expressed views may not

capture the extent to which they have critically considered its relevance. It is perhaps not surprising to find the group of students we have labelled as ‘rejecters’. This group display reactionary views towards educational theory. Importantly they tend to draw on a significant number of tropes and sayings to justify their views suggesting that their rationale for rejecting educational theory has not been as a result of a thoughtful critique of its merits. The use of these commonly used sayings and tropes suggest that the student teachers are reifying existing discourses in a somewhat automatic manner. This group are perhaps both rejecting the authority of the teacher educators and the relevance of the theories presented, i.e., rejecting both the expertise and legitimate power bases of the teacher educator.

The second category of student teacher to express negative opinions about educational theory is rather different and much less frequent (resisters). The unexpected finding of this research was identifying students who spoke negatively of educational theory yet internalised it as part of their practice. This calls into question the traditional binary representation of student teachers as those accepting or rejecting educational theory. Participants within this category, while expressing negative views, positioned educational theory as part of their practice. This was done in two ways; firstly they tended to draw on educational theories in a very detailed way when expressing why they believed ‘educational theory’ had limited value and secondly they also positioned educational theory as central to their professional practice in their discourse. From the perspective of power bases (French and Raven, 1968) it could be argued, that this group may be accepting the value of educational theory for teachers’ practice (the expertise power base) but rejecting the source of the information (the legitimate power base), i.e., the authority of the teacher educators that have presented it.

The group that appear to have both internalised and spoken positively about educational theory we have termed ‘embracers’. Embracers see both the value of educational theory and have also internalised it as part of their professional practice. For example, when

expressing why it was important they tended to provide elaborate explanations. They also employed several discursive processes positioning it as central to their own professional selves. Applying the framework above they appear to be accepting both the expertise and legitimate power bases.

In contrast, the other group that expressed positive opinions about educational theory we have called the ‘acceptors’. Acceptors speak about educational theory in positive ways but they clearly position it as external to their practice both temporally and spatially as highlighted in the findings. This group appear to have accepted that educational theory has value but there does not appear to be the same level of consideration given that was evident amongst the ‘embracers’ and ‘resisters’. One could argue that this group may reflect that they have accepted the authority of the source of the theories (legitimate power base) rather than the theories themselves (expertise power base). This largely ‘superficial’ adoption is similar to the superficial rejection of theory from their ‘rejecter’ counterparts.

As all groups have highlighted, student teachers displaying negative or positive attitudes towards educational theory are not simply assessing its merits. Their acceptance or rejection of it could instead reflect their acceptance or rejection of the authority of the teacher educator (legitimate power base). If, as has been highlighted, the legitimacy of the teacher educator is dismissed as being distant from ‘real’ classrooms then the associated theories are similarly dismissed. However, this model also highlights a novel category of student teacher that has critically considered the various educational theories they have confronted and shows evidence that exposure to them has provided them with deeper perspectives on their practice, but they continue to speak negatively about ‘educational theory’. Should such outcomes be seen as a success? One could argue that the “resisters” group may be a more desirable outcome than students that express positive views of educational theory but appear to have accepted its legitimacy automatically without any critical consideration of its merits

(acceptors). At a time when the aim of teacher education programmes is to prepare critically engaged professionals for a life-long journey of reflective practice, the ‘considered dismissives’, perhaps more accurately reflect the ‘inquiry-as-stance’ (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009) mind-set espoused in the literature.

6. Conclusion

The framework used to categorise participants in this study is a helpful model but we have drawn from a relatively small sample size and hence should be seen as a tentative framework or perhaps at best a useful alternative perspective through which to view the theory-practice divide that merits further investigation. Nonetheless, the present conceptualisation is helpful in highlighting a number of issues. Firstly, it highlights that student teachers’ acceptance or rejection of educational theory is not simply an issue of relevance. Through a lens of power and authority, expressed acceptance of the relevance of educational theory may instead be an articulation of compliance and acceptance of the authority of others. While the aim of teacher education programmes is to ultimately develop student teachers that critically question the merits of educational theory (what we have called ‘embracers’), the evidence from this study would suggest that a much higher proportion of students in this study are more accepting of educational theory, or reject it outright, without showing evidence of critically considering it. The study also indicates that many students appear quite positive towards educational theory, providing what could be described as an ‘off the shelf’ expected response, but that it is positioned outside of their practice.

The model also highlights a group of students that to date have been largely invisible in the current debate about theory and practice. The ‘resisters’ (those that expressed negative opinions but had both internalised it and had very detailed rationales for their positions) are

perhaps a more desirable outcome than the students that have accepted educational theories, almost at face value (accepters). If the goal of teacher education is to develop critically engaged teachers (Malm, 2009; Knight, 2015), particularly in light of the neo-liberal reforms that aim to de-professionalise their roles (Czerniawski, 2011; Gilroy, 1992), then perhaps student teachers' opinions about educational theory is not as important as their ability to critically reflect on all sources of information they encounter as emerging professionals.

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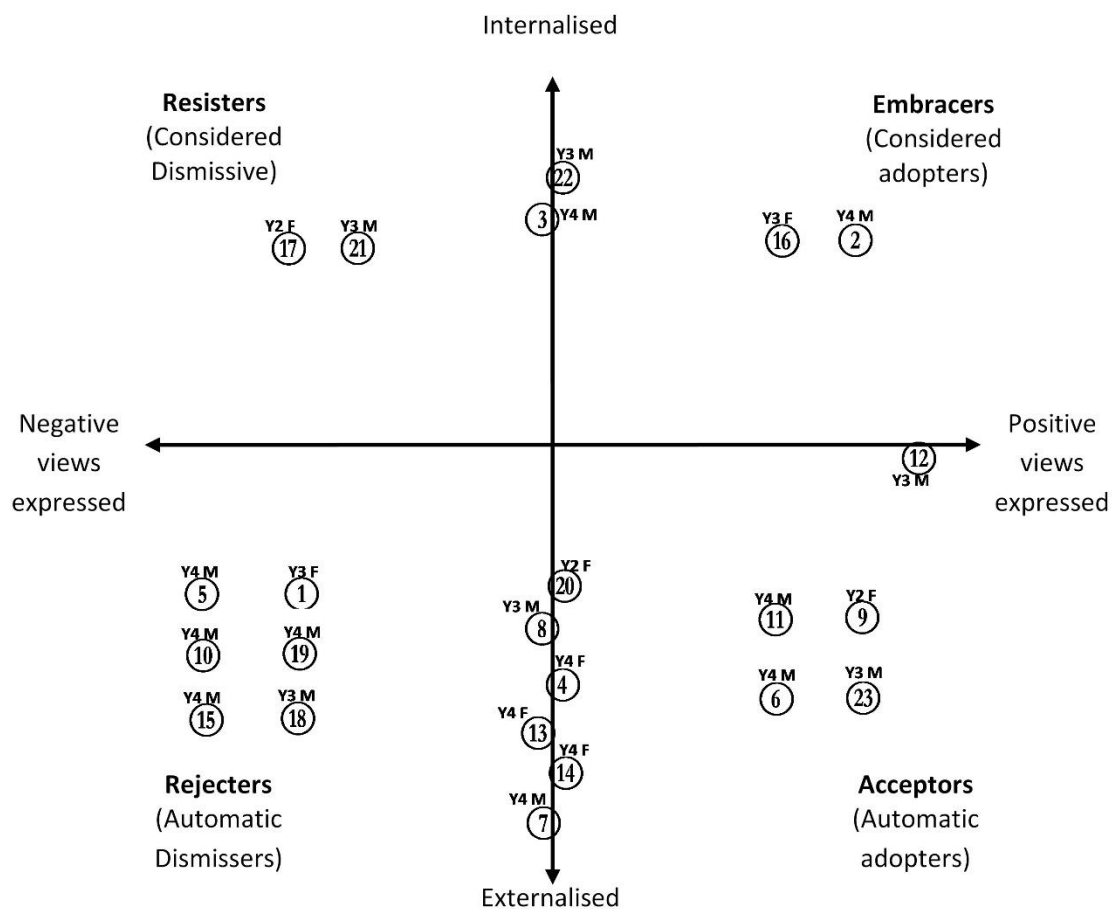


Figure 1